The CASE OF THE CURIOUS HEEL

25¢

BY KEN CROSSEN

An EERIE SERIES PUBLICATION

The Case of the

CURIOUS HEEL

is a story of intrigue, guaranteed to hold your interest.

The plot centers around a successful writer. Despised by all who work with him and each with sufficient cause to do murder, a different yarn, full of adventure, swift action and exciting suspense is presented.

Necessary Smith, that long nosed private sleuth works along with the Geranium-loving Jason Jones. They work smoothly and unhurriedly towards logical solutions—only to find themselves involved.

However, dogged determination wins through to make this mystery thriller something to be remembered.

The Publishers

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By

KEN CROSSON

An Eerie Series Publication

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PLAY'S THE THING

"THE BODY is lying in the center of a huge white rug which is slowly turning to crimson. The very life blood of a man is dyeing the rug and giving it a lush brilliance that will hold all eyes in horrible fascination. A set of Kleig lights throw their merciless glare over the body so that no detail of the death may be missed. Yet the room is completely locked. Every door, every window, is locked in such a manner that the police know it is impossible for anyone to get into the room without crawling through the keyhole. But when the police break down the door and enter the room, they find John Aloysius already dead, his blood not yet cold, and beside him the gun that fired the fatal shots.

"It's a perfect picture of suicide. The gun is where it might have dropped from his lifeless hand. But — *but* the entire surface of the gun has been wiped clean, so that there is not a single print on it. And a man with a forty-five slug through his heart doesn't clean off his gun after shooting himself. It's murder."

"The police go over the room inch by inch. They get plenty of fingerprints but they all belong to John Aloysius. All but one. In the very center of the *ceiling* they find the right thumb print of Bill Carter! In the center of the ceiling! . . . It's terrific, I tell you!"

The speaker stopped and gazed at his audience. He was a slight young man with dark hair and eyes and a scornful mouth. He wore cream-colored slacks with a brown and cream-colored checked jacket. The checks were easily two inches square. Instead of a tie he wore a white silk scarf with an all-over print of miniature American flags.

"I work my guts out over this story and you," he continued, pointing a forefinger, "have the brass to tell me it isn't original!"

Bennett Barlay squirmed under that pointing finger and ran his fingers through blond hair.

"But, Johnny," he said, "it *is* a lot like that story I did for *Detective Yarns Weekly*. It was called *Thumbs Up For Death*."

"It's a lot like a story *you* did," Johnny said sarcastically. "And whose name was it under?"

"Yours, but —"

"You're goddam right it was under my name. And if it was under my name, you must have gotten the idea from me so it is original with me. Why do you think the lousy pulp magazines buy those stories you write and pay three cents a word for them? Do you think it's because you write the stories? You're damn well right it isn't! It's because they can put the name Johnny Bell over the story. My name is worth a lot of money to them. It's worth a lot more than the cheap jerks are paying. Three hit movies in a row! This month alone there are stories of mine in *Cosmopolitan*, *American* and *Saturday Evening Post*. So don't start getting too big for your suit, chum."

"Leave him alone, Johnny," said the pretty, brown-haired girl sitting behind him. As Johnny Bell talked, she had nervously twisted the plain wedding band on her finger. "They may pay you three cents a word but Bennett only gets one cent of that and you know he does all the work."

"Shut up," Johnny said. "Just because you're my wife doesn't mean you know everything."

"Only God and Johnny Bell know everything," another voice said sarcastically. It came from a sprawling figure on the davenport beside Bennett Barlay. Manny Ladd was Johnny's press agent. His black hair was nearly always uncombed, his suits never looked as though they had been pressed, but he still managed to look attractive. There was a cynical smile on his dark face.

"Cheap wisecracks," Johnny said. "If you spent more time getting items about me in the paper and less time looking at my wife, you might earn your salary."

"Johnny!" Betty Bell exclaimed into the silence that followed.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Betty," Manny Ladd said. "He's an egomaniac and some day I'm going to tell the truth about him."

"Parasites!" Johnny Bell said. "Every one of you would starve to death if it weren't for me. At least Betty has a license giving her the privilege to sponge. But the rest of you can drop off any time. If it weren't for me, Barlay'd be lucky if he sold two stories a year; Willard would be picking up nickels off the street; Manny would be earning twenty bucks a week on some hick paper; June would be getting fifteen bucks a week for punching

a typewriter in some lousy office and Greg would still be selling vacuum cleaners from door to door. Porter hasn't been on the gravy train before, but he's getting on now."

There was a period of silence as everyone looked uncomfortable and tried to think of a way of changing the subject. Everyone except Gregor Fain, a chunky young man of about Johnny's age, who looked like a successful clerk and was a successful writer.

"Let's have another take on that," he said.

"I really didn't mean that about you, Greg," Johnny said. "Your books are pretty good. But these other parasites. . . ."

The "other parasites," in addition to Betty Bell, Manny Ladd and Bennett Barlay, consisted of Willard Duncan, June Hayes and George Porter.

Willard Duncan was a literary agent. He was nearing fifty but would have looked much younger if it hadn't been for a completely bald head and a perpetual frown. For years all of his attention and energy had gone into Johnny Bell while his secretary handled his remaining clients. He made ten thousand dollars a year in commissions from Bell. As a result he never argued with him. He gave Bell nearly all of his plots but he was careful how he did it.

"There ought to be a great story in a duel between a submarine and a destroyer," he'd remark casually.

An hour later he would say, "That was a great idea you had about a story of a duel between a submarine and a destroyer."

"It was terrific," Johnny would agree. "The best idea I've had in a long time. I think I'll start it tonight."

June Hayes was tiny and blonde and cute. The first month she had worked for Johnny she was busy keeping his arms from slipping around her waist. Then he met a red-headed chorus girl and left her alone. She knew how to handle Johnny and she felt a great sympathy for Betty. She stayed because she earned a good salary.

George Porter, too, was nearing fifty. His waistline was too big, his face was too red and those who knew him well were making book as to whether his hair could have time to turn gray before it fell out. He was worth two million dollars and his wife was the head of twenty-seven committees. He had hazy thoughts of recapturing his lost youth with some glamorous, perfumed star of the stage or screen. He was willing to pay for that to the

tune of fifty thousand dollars to back a show written, produced and directed by Johnny Bell.

He thought Johnny was temperamental.

"Leeches!" Johnny added as a way of emphasis.

"Hello, everybody," cried a new voice and Karen Russell swept into the room. It was an entrance, calculated and affected, but such was her beauty that no one minded. Her bright hair, gold at the crest of each wave and flame-gold in the hollows, swept back from her broad forehead and over the tips of her ears to her shoulder. A close-fitting frock accented her figure. Her short bright lips were parted over perfect teeth in a completely artificial smile.

"You too," muttered Johnny.

"What?"

"You're a parasite too," Johnny repeated.

"That wasn't what you called me the last time I saw you, dear," Karen said. Her gray eyes glanced briefly towards Betty Bell.

"Okay, darling," Johnny answered, suddenly grinning boyishly.

Betty Bell marveled, for perhaps the thousandth time, at her husband. She felt sorry for him, rather than for herself. She had stopped loving him years ago but she stuck by him, as did all the others, attracted by his endless energy and the ego that refused to be dented. The fascination of the horrible, someone in Hollywood had tagged it. She had sat in Slapsie Maxie's and heard two girls at the next table discussing Johnny and his wife. That one phrase was all she could remember.

He's a heel, thought Manny Ladd savagely, suffering all the pain and embarrassment that he thought Betty was feeling. A heel and a rat, he thought, but not for long because I'm going to fix him good. . . .

The bell rang.

"I'll get it," Betty said. She rose and crossed the room swiftly. There was a natural grace to her movements.

She was back in a moment. With her was a tall, well-groomed man with gray hair. His thin, almost handsome face, was stamped with cynicism and alcohol. An odor of Scotch drifted into the room with him.

"Hello, Manny," he said. "Hello, Bell."

"Hello, Ray," Johnny Bell said quickly. For the first time there was something almost like respect in his voice. "Thanks for the plug in your column this morning."

"Don't thank me," the newcomer said, his clear voice giving no indication of the alcohol bubbling within. "Thank your press agent."

"Anyway, it was swell of you," Johnny said. "I'm glad you were able to come over tonight."

"How about a drink then," Ray said bluntly.

"Betty, tell the maid to bring in that Scotch. What do you want for a chaser, Ray?"

"Scotch."

It amused Manny Ladd to see the great Johnny Bell being respectful and slightly subservient and he laughed. He knew, even if Johnny didn't, that Ray Martin was here because he, Manny, had asked him to come. As big a name as Johnny was, he was still small potatoes to Ray Martin, whose *From Broadway to Hollywood Boulevard* column in the N. Y. *Argus* was second only to Winchell's.

Betty returned from the direction of the kitchen and sat down. A Great Dane followed her with the dignity of a king.

"Here, Ulysses," Johnny called. "Here, Boy."

The Great Dane looked at him and then padded over to Betty's chair and dropped to the floor.

Even the dog is wise to him, Manny thought.

"A beautiful animal," said George Porter, glad to have the conversation on an impersonal basis. "How did you come to call him Ulysses?"

"After the book by James Joyce," Johnny answered. "You know Joyce gave me a lot of encouragement when I saw him in Paris before he died. I always wanted to repay him for that. In fact, I almost talked Sam Goldwyn into buying Ulysses three years ago and making a picture out of it."

"That," Ray Martin announced to no one in particular, "would have been an epic. Screen adaptation by Johnny Bell, production by Samuel Goldwyn. Ulysses, starring Gary Cooper and Hedy Lamarr. Or maybe Dorothy Lamour, in a sarong!"

"What about the scene for tonight, Johnny?" Gregor Fain asked.

"Oh sure, the scene," Johnny said. "We might as well do it."

"What's it about?" Karen Russell asked. "I think it's mean of you not to tell us what a scene is about until after you've written it. Or did you tell some of us?"

"Nobody knows anything about the scene but June and me," Johnny said, "and she wouldn't know if she didn't have to type it. I can get a

better picture of it when you act it out that way. You see, Ray," he added, turning to the columnist, "I'm having each scene acted out here as soon as I finish it. This will be the third scene. Of course, Karen is the only one here who will be in the production but if I just hear the lines read, it helps me get the feel of it."

"What's this scene about?" Karen asked.

"You'll know when you read it," Johnny said. "You'll remember the second scene ended with the murder and the discovery of the right thumb print of Bill Carter in the center of the ceiling. The third scene will open at about the same time. Manny, will you run up to my study and bring down that prop revolver that's on the desk?"

"Goody, we're going to play Cowboy and Indians," Manny mocked. But he got up and ran swiftly up the stairs. A moment later he was back with the gun, a short-barrelled .32. He handed it to Johnny.

"Don't let it scare you," Johnny said, noticing that Ray Martin's eyes were on the gun. "Those bullets you can see in the cylinder are dummies. This is a gun I had for a gag in Hollywood. The chamber under the hammer is empty * and the other five have the dummies."

"Are you sure they're dummies?" Willard Duncan asked.

"I looked today," Johnny said. "But if you're going to worry, Grandmother Duncan, I'll prove it to you." He raised the muzzle of the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger rapidly.

There were five swift clicks.

"Satisfied?" Johnny asked.

"You shouldn't do things like that," Karen said. Her face was pale. "It's bad luck."

"Nuts," Johnny said. "I'm Johnny Bell and I make my own luck. . . . Catch."

He tossed the gun to her.

She caught it and held it gingerly in one hand.

"Couldn't we get along without using the gun?" George Porter asked anxiously.

"That's what I say," Willard put in.

"Old fogies!" scoffed Johnny. "I want it to look real. What the hell's the matter with all of you anyway? You look like a bunch of kids scared by a pumpkin face."

* Experienced gunmen often keep an empty chamber under the hammer.

It was true, but nobody knew quite why. The way that Johnny had placed the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger had quieted them, even though they knew it had been a characteristic gesture.

"I'd rather you didn't use the gun even if it is harmless," Betty said. "Maybe it's just a symbol. . . ."

"For Pete's sake!" Johnny said with violence. "We'll use it. . . . Here's the situation. When the curtain goes up, Karen is in her room. Her dress is partly torn off one shoulder."

"Trust Johnny to get bare flesh in somewhere," Manny said.

"Bill Carter — that's you, Manny," Johnny continued, ignoring his remark, "is standing across the table from Karen. Take your places."

Manny and Karen got on opposite sides of a card table that had been set up next to the wall. They looked to Johnny for further directions.

"There's a limit to this realism," Karen said. "I won't tear this dress."

"Okay," Johnny said. He took a manuscript from June Hayes and glanced at the first page. "You are pointing the gun at him, Karen."

She lifted her arm and pointed the gun at Manny. "Now you're saying, 'This is the last time you'll ever do this to me — or to any other girl.'"

"This is the last time you'll ever do this to me — or to any other girl," Karen said, with rage in her voice. She wasn't a bad actress.

"Now, softly: 'From me to you with love — darling.' Put some feeling in it."

She repeated the line, making her voice husky.

Manny had been gazing idly at the gun in her hand. Suddenly his expression changed.

"Say —" he began.

"Don't interrupt," Johnny snapped. "Karen, pull the trigger and then you slump to the floor, Manny."

Karen pressed the trigger.

The roar of the gun was deafening in the room. A patch of red suddenly bloomed on Manny's shirt front. His mouth opened as though he was going to say something but thin red bubbles came out instead of words. He grabbed at the card table and then slid to the floor, dragging the card table with him.

Karen screamed.

CHAPTER TWO

IS IT NECESSARY?

THE SIGN on the door read: *Necessary Smith, Private Investigations Discreetly Handled.*

It was a name which aroused the curiosity of everyone who passed along the corridor of that particular floor in the Empire State Building.

The man who was identified with that name sat behind his desk inside and tried to control his temper. He was a tall, thin — almost bony — man in his early thirties. His thick black hair refused to be subjugated by an ordinary comb. His face was commonplace with the exception of a nose that was heroic in its proportions. His nose had provoked many an argument as to whether he resembled Jimmy Durante or Cyrano de Bergerac the most. He wore a dark brown suit, a dark brown shirt and an orange tie, an outfit which he wore 365 days out of the year. No one knew whether they were always the same suit, shirt and tie or whether he possessed innumerable duplicates.

But it was Necessary Smith's name that was the present cause for his rising anger. Danton Walker's column for that morning had listed his among unusual names and it had been followed by exactly sixty-two calls from people who merely wanted to know why he was called Necessary, two calls from people who wanted him to find lost dogs, one from a practical joker, and one legitimate call.

Now a fat, slightly-drunken gentleman stood in front of him and demanded that the name be explained to him.

"Anyway," the fat man was saying, "I'm going to give you m'case jus' on the strength of your name. So you gotta tell me."

"What did you say your name was?" Necessary Smith asked coldly.

"George K. Belden," the fat man answered promptly. "I'm the president of the Belden Grocery chain and I gotta important case for you. But firs', I wanta know why you're called Necessary."

"All right," Necessary said with resignation. Ordinarily he didn't mind — maybe even gloried in it — telling the story of his name, but this day

his patience had been tried beyond endurance. "I was christened John Arthur James Smith, not a particularly unusual name, you must admit. Then I started working for a private detective agency owned by Bruce Elliott. Nothing that any of his operators ever did was right. Every time I made a report on a case, he'd interrupt every few words to growl, 'Was that necessary, Smith?' One day I got mad and went down and had my name legally changed to Necessary Smith.

"The old man had a sense of humor and that tickled him. In fact, it tickled him so much that when he retired two years ago, he gave his whole business to me. Now are you satisfied?"

"Won'erful," the fat man breathed.

"Now," Necessary Smith said, "what's your case? Make it snappy because I have to go out on another case in about an hour. That's the only reason I'm still here in the office."

"I'll tell you," the fat man said confidentially, leaning closer in order to be more generous with his breath. "I'm a married man, see. Me an' the li'l woman was at a cocktail party all afternoon. On Park Avenue. I was off in a room taking a li'l nap, see, an' when I wake up I hear my wife in the next room makin' a date with some guy. Now I want —"

"You mean you want me to get divorce evidence for you?" Necessary Smith asked.

"That's it," the fat man nodded happily.

"Get out!"

"Now look here," the fat man said, his stomach quivering with indignation. "I'm George K. Belden and you can't —"

Necessary Smith grabbed a bottle of ink from his desk and threw it with the same motion. The fat man scuttled through the door and the ink bottle, cap intact, bounced harmlessly off the wall.

The fat man was gone and the manner of his going had restored much of Necessary Smith's good humor. He leaned back in his swivel chair and stroked his nose with affection.

The phone rang.

Necessary scowled at the offending instrument and gingerly removed the receiver.

"N. Smith Agency," he said cautiously, instead of bellowing his full name as was his usual procedure.

The voice on the other end identified itself.

"Yes, Mr. Bell," Necessary said. "I'm all ready to be over at your place in an hour."

The receiver squawked in reply.

"Murder?" Necessary exclaimed. "You want me to work on that? The fee will be a little more."

The receiver squawked rapidly.

"Okay," Necessary said. "I'll be there right away."

He hung up and grabbed an old brown slouch hat from the wastepaper basket.

His long legs carried him rapidly out of the office. The headquarters of the Necessary Smith Detective Agency was closed for the day.

CHAPTER THREE

DETECTIVE MEETS DETECTIVE

JOHNNY BELL opened the front door of the brownstone house himself. He stared, perhaps over-long, at the nose of the man before him and then raised his eyes questioningly.

"I'm Necessary Smith," the detective said.

"Oh — to be sure," Johnny said. He held the door open. "Come in."

Necessary stepped into the foyer and removed the brown slouch hat. He waited patiently until Johnny had shut the door.

"Did I understand you to say this was a murder case?" he asked.

"Apparently."

"And you want me to solve it?"

"If you feel that you can serve my interests best by doing so," Johnny said. "You understand that a thing of this kind can do a lot of harm to a man of my standing. It's already become an inconvenience. But, chiefly, you are here to protect my interests. I imagine solving the murder will come under that heading."

Necessary Smith had already decided he didn't like his client and had upped his price while Johnny was talking.

"In that case, the retainer will be five hundred dollars instead of the one hundred I quoted you this morning," he said.

"That's okay," Johnny said. He pulled a roll of money from his pocket and stripped five one-hundred-dollar bills.

Necessary stuffed them in his vest pocket.

"The police have been here?" he asked.

"Hundreds of them," Johnny said, exasperation in his voice. "The last of the original ones have gone, taking the body with them. But there are still two of them here. Two new ones. One of them is in a back room. I told him about hiring you and he said he wanted to see you as soon as you arrived. I imagine that he'll tell you all about it and you can work along with him. But I wouldn't rely too much on his deductions."

"I don't know," Necessary said dubiously. "The city cops don't care much for private detectives butting into their cases. You may have to give me the dope."

"If he doesn't," Johnny said, but he sounded irritated. "I should think that if you were much of a detective you'd find a way to get along with the cops. It's the last door on the left."

Johnny pointed vaguely down the hall and went into the living room.

Necessary rubbed his nose reflectively and walked down the hall. For five hundred dollars, he decided, he would even talk back to a tough cop.

He opened the door and stepped into a small study. A man sat at the desk facing the door, apparently asleep.

He was without doubt the fattest man that Necessary had ever seen. He bulged from his clothing in such a way as to give his outlines a scalloped effect. His face was round, red and jovial, resting comfortably on three chins. Dark hair, clipped short, made his face even rounder. His gray suit was a shapeless bag. His hands were crossed over an expansive stomach.

Then Necessary discovered that he wasn't asleep. His eyelids drooped but from beneath them a pair of keen eyes was surveying Necessary.

"You the private detective?" he asked.

"That's right," Necessary said.

"I'm Jason Jones from Homicide," the fat man said.

"Well, look, Captain —" Necessary began, deciding to take the offensive.

"Not Captain," the other interrupted.

"Well, Lieutenant —"

"Not Lieutenant either."

"Sergeant —" Necessary began again, but he was floundering a little.

"Nope, not Sergeant. Just plain First Grade Detective Jason Jones."

"You're in charge of this case?" Necessary asked in surprise.

First Grade Detective Jason Jones sighed — a vast sigh that came from the depths of his soul.

"Yeah," he said wearily. "I might as well explain it to you now and get it over with. I got what you might call a working agreement with Captain Haig. I agree to solve any murder cases that are maybe a little difficult and he guarantees that I won't be promoted."

"You mean you don't want to get promoted?" Necessary Smith asked rather violently. Necessary was not greedy for money but neither was he deaf to its call.

"I knew you wouldn't believe it," Jason Jones said, nodding to himself. "Nobody ever does." There was a note of sorrow in his voice.

"I believe it all right," Necessary said, remembering his own difficulties.

"You do?" Jason Jones said eagerly. His three chins trembled with pleasure.

Necessary nodded. "But why don't you want to be promoted? It would mean more salary."

"And more trouble," Jason said. "You don't know how much politics there is in police work. The minute you're promoted to a sergeant or a lieutenant, a dozen guys will begin to mutter, 'Why was he promoted? I've been here as long as he has!' Then they start figuring out some way to get promoted over you. So you got to lose sleep, thinking up ways to keep your rank. It ain't worth it. I'd rather make less money and have more peace. It gives me time to work with my geraniums."

"Geraniums?"

"Yeah," Jason said, nodding. It was fascinating to watch him nod; as his head dropped down, a fourth chin appeared. "I always like to read detective stories and ever since I read about Nero Wolfe, I wanted to raise orchids. But that's a little too expensive for the ordinary cop. So I took up geraniums and I can't say I'm sorry."

Necessary Smith was confused. He had entered the room to discuss a murder and instead he was in the middle of a talk about geraniums.

"Did you know there are two hundred and fifty species of geraniums, not counting the horticultural varieties?" demanded Jason. Then he added wistfully, "Of course, I can't grow them all. But I have some beautiful specimens of Lady Plymouth, Purple Unique, Prince of Orange, Attar of Roses, Scabrum, Ionidifolium, Schotte, Lady —"

"But this murder . . ." Necessary interrupted desperately.

"Yeah, the murder," Jason said, his expression losing its eagerness. "Maybe you're right. What did you say your name was?"

"Necessary Smith. And just to save time. I had my name legally changed to that because my boss always said, 'Is that Necessary, Smith?' and it tickled him so much he gave me the agency!"

"I know," Jason Jones said. "People bother you, don't they? I know exactly how it is. Suppose I just call you Smith? It seems kind of silly to say Necessary when you want to call someone."

"That's okay," Necessary said.

"You just call me Jason," Jason continued. "The way I look at it, the Jones and the Smiths have to stick together."

"That's right," Necessary said. "Look, Jason, I know you cops don't like a private dick snooping around but —"

"Who said?" Jason asked, opening his eyes.

"Well — that is, every time I've been on a case where the city cops showed up, they always seemed sore."

"Not me. I like private detectives. In fact, I'm very fond of private detectives. I've often thought of being one myself but I could never get up enough energy to start."

Surprises were coming thick and fast for Necessary Smith. But this last one was almost too much. The belief that cops did not like private detectives was so deeply ingrained that Jason's remark was as great a shock as if he had announced that he didn't believe the world was round. Greater, in fact. Necessary could only gape.

"Ever solve a murder?" Jason asked.

"Never worked on a murder case before," Necessary admitted, "so I may not do so well at first."

"Nothing to it," Jason Jones assured him. The fat detective pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his vest pocket. He took out a cigarette, straightened it, applied a match and carefully replaced the pack. Then he asked, "Smoke?"

"No."

"Thought not. I'll tell you, Smith, just between us, there's nothing to this business of solving murders. Because of my agreement with Captain Haig, I only get the cases that look tough to the Bureau. But they're all easy. Let me see . . . there was The Case of The Silver Spoon, The Case

of The Humorous Rabbit, The Case of The Missing G-String, The Case of The Beardless Corpse, The Case of The Plastic Box, The Case of The Golden Buddha, and The Case of The Paper Airplane. All of them cases that the captain said couldn't be solved. But they were easy."

"How come you gave them names like that?" Necessary asked.

"A habit of mine," Jason said with a sheepish grin. "It comes from reading detective novels, I guess. But you can take my word for it, they're all easy. You just got to use the right technique."

"What is that?"

"Waiting," Jason answered, regarding the cigarette smoke from beneath half-closed eyes. "Just waiting. Now you take most detectives, they wear themselves out chasing around. Or they wear themselves out thinking about clues. The murderer feels pretty safe as long as he sees all that activity. But if you just sort of wait, maybe only asking routine questions and not paying much attention to clues, he'll start worrying. And when a murderer worries, he makes mistakes. That's the whole secret. But if there's anything that bothers you at any time just ask me."

"Well, I would like to know who was murdered," Necessary suggested.

"You don't know that?"

"No."

"I thought you were hired to solve the murder," Jason said.

"Not exactly," confessed Necessary. "This Johnny Bell called me this morning and said he wanted to hire me because somebody was planning to pull a fast one on him. I was supposed to be at his house at nine tonight and he was going to tell me the story. He wouldn't say any more on the phone. About an hour ago he called and said I should come right away as there had been a murder.

"When he let me in a minute ago, I told him that there would be a higher charge in case of murder. He paid it without batting an eye. But he didn't say exactly I was to solve the murder. He said I was to do whatever would serve his interests best. He didn't tell me anything about the case, said that you'd tell me about it."

"How much of a retainer did he give you?" Jason asked.

"Five hundred dollars."

"Imagine that!" Jason said. He crushed the cigarette out thoughtfully. "You know, it's just as well I never became a private detective. I wouldn't have the heart to charge that much. Five hundred dollars!"

"The murder case . . ." Necessary suggested again. He was beginning to feel that he might never learn what it was all about.

"Yeah, that's right," Jason said. He looked down at a sheet of paper on the desk and frowned. "I ain't talked to anybody yet, you understand. The boys came out on the call and decided it was a tough case, so Captain Haig called me at home. I got here maybe twenty minutes before you did. Then everybody left except Snell who is sort of herding the witnesses in the living room. I was just in the middle of planting a slip from a Saxafragoides when the captain called."

"A what?" Necessary asked.

"Saxafragoides. Geranium. I didn't finish and I was just worrying —"

"The murder case . . ." Necessary murmured desperately.

"I'm coming to it," Jason said calmly. "You ought to take up the cultivation of geraniums. There's something peaceful about it." He glanced down at the sheet of paper again. "Here's a list of everybody that's in the room. The live ones. You might look it over while I tell you what the boys gave me. They probably got it all wrong, but you might as well know it."

He handed the sheet of paper to Necessary.

"You sure you don't mind?" Necessary asked.

"Not at all," Jason answered, with a wave of one pudgy hand. Again he went through the careful process of removing the crumpled pack from his vest, extracting a cigarette and lighting it.

While he was doing that, Necessary glanced at the sheet. It bore nothing but eleven names down the center.

Johnny Bell
Betty Bell
June Hayes
Karen Russell
Willard Duncan
Ray Martin
Bennett Barlay
George Porter
Gregor Fain
Yvette Duval
Claudette Fay

"Them last two," Jason said, "are maids. I don't suppose they got anything to do with it but Sergeant Kelly was here and he likes to get every-

thing down neat like. Besides he probably enjoyed ogling the maids, if they're pretty — and I expect they are if this Johnny Bell had anything to do with the hiring of them."

"Who was murdered?"

"Fellow named Manny Ladd," Jason said. He was leaning back in the chair and looked as if he'd fallen asleep. "A press agent. Used to be a newspaperman here in New York. I remember meeting him once. Nice fellow, but a little on the sarcastic side. He was press agent for this Johnny Bell."

Necessary Smith found it amazing — and was to find it even more so the longer he knew Jason Jones — the way the fat detective reeled off information although he had been on the case only a few minutes. He was to learn that Jason had the faculty of glancing at something, or hearing it once, and memorizing instantaneously.

"How was he killed?"

"Shot," Jason said. "Shot with a thirty-two revolver right in front of nine witnesses. The maids were out in the kitchen making little sandwiches."

"Then you know who killed him?"

"Not exactly. We know who pulled the trigger but we ain't quite sure who killed him."

"I don't know what you mean?"

"Not sure that I know myself," Jason grunted. "This Johnny Bell is a writing fellow."

"I know that. I've seen his name in magazines. He writes a lot of air stories. I always see a lot of items about him in the columns. Seems to me he was once friendly with James Joyce."

"Wouldn't be surprised," Jason said. "Did you read that book, Ulysses?"

"Yes, but —"

"I kind of like it," Jason said thoughtfully. "It just wandered around like your mind will sometimes. I don't care much for Saroyan, but I liked Joyce."

"The murder case . . ." Necessary hinted.

Jason sighed heavily but took the hint, although he made a feeble effort to show that he hadn't really been off the subject.

"This fellow Bell has a Great Dane dog named Ulysses," he said. "Anyway, this Johnny Bell is a writing fellow. He's been out in Hollywood writing pictures for Dorothy Lamour, Paulette Goddard, Rita Hayworth and some more of them glamour queens. But here a couple of months ago he decided

to write a play and then produce and direct it himself. That's why he is in New York. It seems that every time he gets through writing a scene everybody gets together and acts it out here in his house."

"Who are these other people?" Necessary asked.

"Let me see . . . Betty Bell, that's his wife. Then this June Hayes is his secretary. Willard Duncan is his literary agent. George Porter is the guy who's going to back the play he's writing. Bennett Barlay writes detective stories for the pulp magazines which are published under Bell's name. Ray Martin is the columnist on the *Argus*. Gregor Fain is a friend of Bell's and writes mystery novels. Bad ones."

"Who is Karen Russell?" Necessary asked.

"An actress. She's going to be the star of the new play. Sergeant Kelly said that he suspected she was more than that and he leered when he said it so we can expect the worst. Whenever Kelly leers, the worst is just around the corner."

"Okay. Go ahead."

Jason Jones put out his cigarette and settled in a more comfortable position.

"Like I told you, they've been acting out each scene as soon as Johnny Bell finishes it. He finished a scene today. They just started to act it out and, the first thing, this Karen Russell was supposed to point a gun at Manny Ladd, who was helping to act it out, call him a cur and pull the trigger. There would be an empty click and Manny would drop to the floor. Only there was a shot and Manny really dropped. The M. E. says the bullet caught him square in the heart. Karen Russell proceeded to have hysterics and Johnny Bell called Headquarters."

"Maybe it was an accident," Necessary suggested.

Jason looked at him reproachfully.

"Not a chance," he said. "The gun was supposed to be empty. Not only supposed to be, but nine people swore it was, according to Kelly's report. But three of the nine claimed that they had a 'feeling' about the gun and begged Johnny Bell not to use it. I don't believe much in 'feelings.' Maybe they all had indigestion."

"But all nine swear that the gun was empty?" Necessary asked.

"Uh-huh," Jason grunted. He was going through the process of getting another cigarette. When it was lit, he resumed. "They thought it was empty. The way Kelly told it, Johnny Bell sent Manny Ladd upstairs for

the gun. Manny brought it down and handed it to him. Bell explained that it was a gun he'd had in Hollywood for some kind of joke and said it was loaded with five dummy bullets and that the chamber under the hammer was empty. The witnesses say they could see the noses of the dummy bullets."

"This Willard Duncan wanted to know if he was sure the gun was harmless. So Bell put the gun to his own head and pulled the trigger five times. Then he tossed the gun to the girl and she held it until she pulled the trigger a couple of minutes later."

"Then Manny Ladd, Johnny Bell and Karen Russell were the only ones to handle the gun?"

"At the time of the murder, yes."

"Well, Ladd certainly wouldn't have slipped a real bullet into the gun to kill himself."

"Suicide is out," Jason agreed. "Nobody as lazy as Manny Ladd would go to all that trouble of committing suicide."

"Then either Johnny Bell or Karen Russell must have switched the bullets!"

"Now, now," Jason said reprovingly. "You're forgetting something. What about the sixth chamber in the gun cylinder? Bell only told them it was empty. He only pulled the trigger of the gun five times. Which would bring that supposedly-empty chamber up to where it would go under the hammer the next time the trigger was pulled. So that chamber wasn't empty."

"And that would mean that any of them could have slipped the bullet into the gun," Necessary said, stroking his nose thoughtfully.

Jason nodded, increasing the number of his chins to four.

"But," he said cautiously, "there is another little tidbit that Sergeant Kelly emphasized and which, I suspect, is the reason that Captain Haig turned the case over to me. Nobody knew what Bell was going to have in that scene except Bell and June Hayes, his secretary. He refused to tell anybody. So none of the others knew there was going to be shooting in this scene."

Necessary detected a look of slyness in the fat face.

"What about the secretary?" he demanded.

"I gather," Jason Jones said dryly, "that Sergeant Kelly jumped on that idea with both feet. To begin with, June Hayes was in love with Manny Ladd, according to three or four of the witnesses. This might not mean

anything since he wasn't in love with her. But this gun was locked in a trunk until this morning. Johnny Bell was the only one with the key. June Hayes finished her typing yesterday afternoon and went to visit her mother in Brooklyn. She was away all night and all day, getting back to the house maybe a half hour before everything happened. And she wasn't upstairs after returning."

"But that leaves only Johnny Bell. He must have put the bullet in the gun himself."

"But he hired you to solve the murder," Jason pointed out.

"Because he wanted to make a show of looking for the murderer," Necessary said.

"Why?"

"Because — well . . ."

"Exactly," Jason said. "You wouldn't be able to cover up the facts for him, so why hire you? And you mentioned that he did call you earlier and told you that someone was trying to pull a fast one on him."

"Wait a minute," Necessary said excitedly. "I think I've got it. Killing this Manny Ladd was an accident. The murderer really meant to kill Bell. Maybe Bell is a showoff and the murderer gambled on him putting the gun to his head the way he did and pulling the trigger. But he only pulled the trigger five times instead of six. Then the murderer didn't dare give a warning to save the press agent without giving himself away. Or maybe the press agent was the murderer!"

"How did this murderer of yours know that the gun was going to be used?" Jason asked.

"I don't know," Necessary admitted. "He must have found out some way. Maybe the secretary talked while she was away from the house."

"She told Kelly she didn't. If the press agent had been your hypothetical murderer, he would have found some way of interrupting the scene instead of just letting himself be killed. But that ain't what bothers me. I want to know why the murderer put the bullet in the chamber under the hammer. Why not in one of the other chambers?"

"Maybe it was just accidental," Necessary said.

"Nothing is accidental," Jason said. "I don't believe in accidents."

"But you agree that Bell might have been the one that was supposed to have been killed?"

"I'll tell you," Jason said, lighting another cigarette from the stub of his

old one, "I got a practice of not having any thoughts when I'm on a murder case. They only clutter up your mind. I just sort of listen to everything and wait."

"Whoever put that bullet in the gun must have had the run of the house," Necessary mused. "Are any of these people staying here?"

"Kelly thought of that too," Jason said. "Practically all of them are staying here and have been for several days. Duncan, Ladd, Barlay, Porter, Fain and the secretary were all staying here."

"That doesn't help much then," Necessary agreed. "You haven't talked to any of them yet?"

"No. I like to sort of wait and let people think a while before I talk to them. More murders would be solved if the detective did less thinking and made the murderer do more. The more thinking that's done, the more mistakes there are. Maybe we'll go in and ask them a few questions now. Any time there's something you want to ask, you just butt right in."

Jason heaved himself up out of the chair. The accumulated ashes of four cigarettes covered his pants and his vest but he ignored it. Necessary saw that he wasn't very tall, consequently he looked fatter standing up than he had sitting down. Necessary grinned to himself as he realized how they must look together. Ichabod Crane and Falstaff.

"You see how easy murders are?" Jason said.

"But —" began Necessary.

"Exactly," Jason interrupted. "That is summing the whole case up beautifully. Shall we join the ladies, Smith?"

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HEEL TALKS

EIGHT of the nine people were sitting around the living room, looking subdued. The ninth, Johnny Bell, was striding up and down the room, a cigarette between his thin lips, a frown on his face. The frown deepened as he saw Necessary Smith and Jason Jones in the doorway.

"What the hell's the idea keeping us waiting around in this room?" he demanded savagely. He flung the cigarette into the open fireplace. "I'm

trying to write a play. I'm trying to show how a guy's insides can bleed and you fiddle around and waste my time!"

"Johnny!" Betty Bell said softly.

"Shut up," he snapped.

"Some guy did bleed in here tonight," Jason Jones said calmly, glancing to where the rug was still stained. He waddled across the room and dropped into an easy chair with a sigh of comfort. He looked half asleep but Necessary had seen the sharpness of his eyes and was not fooled.

"You just take it easy, son," Jason said to Bell. "You're Johnny Bell, eh?"

"That's right."

"You do some writing, don't you?"

"Some writing!" snorted Johnny Bell. "I'm one of the biggest names in this racket today. And I'm just starting."

"When did you begin writing?" Jason asked just as though there hadn't been any murder.

"When I was eight years old — and when I was nine, I tore those stories up because I had improved."

"You make a lot of money at it, I expect?"

"A lousy hundred grand a year," Johnny said. "That's nothing. I want to make so much money I stink with it and then show it doesn't mean anything. I'm only thirty-one and I've got the same burning ambition I had when I started. I'm going to write a great novel, a great play, a great screenplay, a great radio drama, and a great book of short stories!"

"I must warn Orson Welles," Ray Martin muttered.

Necessary Smith cleared his throat loudly as a hint to Jason. The fat detective glanced at him reproachfully and turned back to Johnny.

"This present play," he said. "What's it about?"

"About people," Johnny said. "People that live and sweat, suffer and ache and then have a little sunshine in their lives."

"Sure," Jason grunted, "but what's the plot about?"

"A boy who thinks he loves a woman but eventually discovers that he loves another girl he has been ignoring."

"Miss Russell," Jason said, "is the girl he thinks he loves?"

"Yes."

"And there's maybe a murder in it?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it — including who the murderer is."

"I can't do that," Johnny said. "It might get out and somebody would steal it."

"You can't keep it a secret forever," Jason said. "I don't think any of these people would steal it. I'm too busy with my geraniums to write it myself. You can always insure it against theft."

Necessary Smith cleared his throat again but Jason ignored him.

"Well," Johnny said, hesitatingly. Then his love for the center of the stage overcome his reluctance. "The murder's in the second scene. The man who is murdered has befriended two brothers, Tom and Bill Carter. Both brothers think they're in love with this Timi Lane, played by Karen. Their friend warns them about her and that night he is murdered. In a locked room. There are no fingerprints except one of Bill Carter's on the ceiling. Apparently Bill Carter kills his friend and then goes and attacks Timi. In self-defense, she is forced to shoot him."

"This Bill Carter was the role that Manny Ladd was playing?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Johnny said, frowning at the interruption.

"He played the same role in the first two scenes?"

"Yes."

"And, in the play," Jason said lazily, "the murderer of both the friend and Bill Carter is this Timi what's-her-name?"

"How did you know?" Johnny Bell asked in astonishment.

"Guessed it," Jason said. "And the little mousey girl who loved the other Carter knew it all the time and she's the one that straightened everything out, huh?"

"Well — yes."

"I knew it," Jason said, nodding. "I have a feeling for plot. Always thought maybe I should've been a writer."

He fished out the crumpled pack of cigarettes again and lit up.

"Manny work for you long?" he asked.

"Two years," Johnny said shortly. He was sulking because Jason had guessed his plot. "He started just before I went to Hollywood."

"Got you a lot of publicity?"

"Yes."

"This your New York home?" Jason asked, looking around the living room.

"It's just rented for six months."

"Nothing like being in your own home," Jason said with a sigh. "Manny didn't know what the plot of this third scene was?"

"Nobody did."

"You didn't tell anyone the whole plot?"

"No. Even Miss Hayes didn't know that. She only knew what she typed."

"Nobody knew you were going to use the gun?"

"No."

"Your secretary knew?"

"She didn't even know I was going to use the gun in the scene," Johnny admitted. "She only knew the scene called for a shooting."

"Why did you use it?"

"I like to have everything as real as possible," Johnny said.

"Didn't tear Miss Russell's dress though?"

"No."

"You liked Manny?" Jason asked.

"Not exactly," Johnny said defiantly.

"Got any ideas how that bullet got in it?"

"No."

"Okay," Jason said. He looked around the room. "Mrs. Bell?"

"Yes?" she said quietly.

Necessary looked at her in surprise. He had unconsciously tagged her as the secretary. He saw a small woman, with a trim figure, dressed plainly. Her hair was a warm shade of brown with natural reddish streaks through it. Now that he had taken a second look, Necessary decided that she was really the most beautiful of the three women in the room. But you'd never get it on the first look. Hers was a quiet beauty.

"You didn't know what was going to be in your husband's scene?"

"No."

"Did you know he was going to use the gun?"

"No. Not until he sent Manny for it."

"You like your husband's play?" Jason asked suddenly.

She hesitated and smiled, her eyes crinkling up.

"I suppose it's all right," she said. "I really don't know much about plays. I used to know a lot about radio; I was a script supervisor. But plays are a little out of my province."

"Did you like Manny Ladd?"

Her hesitation was barely noticeable.

"Everyone liked Manny," she said.

"Know of any enemies he had?"

"No," she answered but there was a note of uncertainty in her voice.

"Did you know where your husband kept that gun?"

"I wasn't even aware that he had brought it from Hollywood."

"Know how anyone could have gotten to it to put a real bullet in it?"

"I guess almost anyone could have," she said. "If it was in his study. That is after he took it from the trunk."

"You don't think anyone could have slipped the bullet into the gun after it was brought downstairs?"

"No."

"Everybody seemed sort of surprised when the harmless gun went off?" Jason asked.

"Yes."

"But nobody knew there was anything wrong until then?"

"No — I'm not sure. I think maybe Manny knew there was something wrong, but he must not have known what it was. I may be wrong . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Betty Bell said slowly, "just as Johnny was telling Karen her lines before pulling the trigger, Manny started to say something. He said, 'Say —' and Johnny told him not to interrupt. A second later she pulled the trigger."

"Uh-huh," Jason said. He glanced at Necessary. "That sort of fits in with my idea that the real bullet was put in the empty chamber. Maybe he noticed that he could see the nose of a bullet in the chamber that was supposed to be empty. Then he might have decided he was mixed up. Anything else, Mrs. Bell?"

"I don't think so."

"June Hayes," Jason said.

"I'm June Hayes," the tiny blonde said. She was no more than five feet tall. Her pretty face, framed by ash blonde hair, looked like a doll's. Her eyes showed evidence of crying.

"How long you worked for Johnny Bell?"

"Three years."

"Like it?"

"I need the job and I like the salary," she said frankly. Johnny Bell frowned.

"You were away last night and most of today?"

"Yes. I went to see my mother."

"You were there all the time?"

"Yes."

"You didn't tell anyone about this third scene in the play?"

"No. I try to forget my job when I'm away from it."

"Did you know that Bell intended using a real gun when the scene was acted out?"

"No."

"You had seen the gun before?"

"Yes. I remember seeing it at a party in Hollywood. I think he got it for some practical joke, but then it was used when everyone used to play Murder."

"Do you like geraniums?" Jason asked.

It was annoying, and a bit of a shock, to Necessary Smith when Jason popped in questions that had nothing to do with the case. Necessary was leaning against the door, stroking his nose reflectively, and listening carefully. He noticed that Jason was spilling ashes all over himself again.

"Why, yes," she answered, her voice puzzled.

"Did you like Manny Ladd?"

"Yes," she answered. Tears glistened in her eyes again.

"Maybe even loved him?" Jason asked.

"Yes." Her voice was so low that Necessary could barely hear her.

"Know of any enemies he had?"

"No. He never confided in me."

"You heard him start to say something just before he was shot?"

"Yes. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but Betty must be right in thinking he knew there was something wrong."

"Don't know how the bullet got in the gun?"

"No."

Jason lit another cigarette and looked towards Karen Russell. She gave him a smile that was supposed to indicate the tragedy of it all. It was strictly a theatrical smile, but there was nothing theatrical about the pallor of her face.

"You Karen Russell?" Jason asked.

"Yes." Her voice was throaty, but the echo of hysterics could still be heard in it.

"An actress?"

"Yes."

"What'd you do?"

"I had supporting roles in several movies," she said. "Then Johnny — Mr. Bell thought I would do for the starring role in his new play."

"It means a lot to you, doesn't it?" Jason asked.

"Oh yes."

"You didn't have any idea that there was a real bullet in the gun when Bell handed it to you?"

"No . . . Oh, it was so terrible! I pulled the trigger expecting to just hear a click and there was that awful roar. Then blood began running down the front of his shirt just like — just like it's supposed to spread over the white rug in Johnny's play." Her lips were trembling, but Necessary wasn't sure whether it was real or acting.

"Now, now," Jason said gently. "It would seem," he added cautiously, "that you aren't guilty of his death. You were the instrument, but if you didn't know the bullet was in the gun you're not any more guilty than the gun is. If it wasn't that way, you could be sure that Sergeant Kelly would have dragged you to the station by the back of the hair. Got any idea how the bullet got in the gun?"

"No."

"Did you like Manny?"

"Yes. He was awfully sarcastic sometimes, but I liked him."

Jason turned his gaze to the well-built young man, with the blond hair, who sat on the couch.

"Who are you?"

"Bennett Barlay."

"What do you do?"

Bennett Barlay glanced uncertainly at Johnny Bell and then brought his eyes back to Jason.

"I'm a ghost," he said.

"You look pretty healthy," Jason said with a chuckle. "What do you ghost?"

"Johnny," Barlay explained, "got his start in the pulps, you know. After he started selling the slicks and working in Hollywood, naturally the pulps wanted his stuff even more. But he didn't have time, so he had me do them."

"But the magazines use his name on them?"

"Yeah."

"Make much that way?" Jason asked.

"Enough," Bennett Barlay said.

"Know Bell long?"

"Maybe six years. I used to be the assistant editor of one of the magazines that bought his stories."

"Know Manny well?"

"Not very. I met him when he started working for Johnny. But then they've been in Hollywood most of the time."

"Know any reason why he should have been killed?"

"No."

"Did the magazines pay you and then you send Bell's share on to him?"

"No. The checks went to Willard, who is my agent too, and he sent separate checks out."

"You do some writing on your own?"

"A little."

"Ever see the gun before?"

"No."

"Did you know it was up in the study?"

"No."

"You're Ray Martin?" Jason asked, directing his gaze to the man next to Barlay.

"Right, Lieutenant," the columnist said.

"Not Lieutenant," Jason said patiently. "Just plain ordinary First Grade Detective Jason Jones."

"Wait a minute," Martin said. "Jason Jones. You're the detective that solved The Case of The Golden Buddha?"

"Yeah," Jason said briefly, but he was pleased.

Necessary could almost see Ray Martin making a mental notation for his column.

"You a friend of Bell's?" Jason asked.

"Only met him once before."

"Why were you here."

"Because Manny Ladd asked me to come. I would have done almost anything for Manny. . . . Maybe I can still do something for him."

"You knew Manny well?"

"For ten years."

"Know of any enemies he had?"

"No."

"Know any reason why he was killed?"

"If I do," Ray Martin said with a grin, "you'll read it in my column."

"George Porter?" Jason said.

"I am George Porter," a man answered from a chair beside the couch.

He was the type of man, Necessary Smith noted, who looked fatter than Jason even though he was probably fifty pounds lighter.

"You staying here in the house?" Jason asked.

"Mr. Bell was kind enough to insist that I do so," George Porter answered. "I live in Westchester County and this makes it easier to keep in contact with the play."

"You're backing it?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"We have estimated fifty thousand dollars, including advance royalty."

"How much have you put up?"

"Ten thousand."

"Lot of money," Jason said, shaking his head. "Ever see the gun before it was produced tonight?"

"No."

"What business were you in?"

"Hardware. Wholesale. But I hardly see —"

"You wouldn't," Jason interrupted placidly. "No soul in hardware. What was your opinion of the deceased?"

"Ladd?" George Porter said, pursing his lips. "A little on the frivolous side, but a nice chap."

"Haven't we had about enough of this?" Johnny demanded.

"Soon," Jason said calmly. "You must be Willard Duncan?" He looked at the bald-headed, heavy-set man.

Duncan nodded.

"Literary agent?"

"I am."

"Must be interesting work. Handled Bell long?"

"Six years."

"Handle many other people?"

"Yes," Willard Duncan said, "although my secretary does most of the work. Johnny is my only important client."

"Shouldn't need much more," Jason commented. "Ten per cent of a hundred thousand ain't bad. Spend most of your time with Bell?"

"Yes."

"Staying here in the house?"

"Yes."

"Stayed with him in Hollywood?"

"Yes."

"Probably did a lot to build him up to where he is?"

"I hope I had something to do with it," Duncan said unctuously. "But I doubt if I did much. Johnny was a very talented youngster. Guidance, perhaps, was all I could furnish."

"You think he'll go higher?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Knew Manny long?"

"Three years, I guess."

"Liked him?"

"Yes."

"Ever see the gun before?"

"Not since Hollywood."

Jason turned and looked at the remaining witness. That young man grinned back.

"I'm Gregor Fain," he said. "I've known Johnny since we were both starving hack writers in New York. I'm staying in the house but am going back to my own apartment tomorrow morning. I knew Manny faintly; I liked him; I don't know of any enemies he had; I never saw the gun before; I didn't know they were going to use it; and I think you're a lousy detective."

"Hmmm," grunted Jason. "You write detective novels, don't you?"

"That's right," Gregor said. "My last book, The Thirsty Leopard, sold more copies than any mystery my publishers ever put out, and I wrote it in two weeks."

"I've read it," Jason said calmly, as if that was enough answer to comment. He seemed to sink deeper in the chair and his eyes became interested in the pattern of the rug where the blood had done its best to alter the rugmaker's art.

"Who suggested that Bell test the gun to see if it was loaded?" he asked.

"Nobody exactly suggested that," Willard Duncan said. "I asked him if he was sure it did hold dummies and he used that method of answering me."

"Why?" Jason asked, directing his gaze towards Johnny.

"Because I don't like people who are always so goddam afraid something's going to happen," Johnny said contemptuously.

"Something did happen," Jason remarked. "Do you suppose you might have done something like that even if nothing had been said?"

"Maybe," Johnny said. "Why?"

"There is the possibility," Jason said, "that Manny was killed accidentally. Perhaps that bullet was meant for you."

"I was wondering if you were ever going to stumble on that," Johnny said.

"Know anybody who'd like to kill you?"

"Hundreds of them," muttered Ray Martin, but so low that only Necessary heard him.

"I've got an idea," Johnny said, "and if I'm right, you don't have to worry about catching the murderer."

"What does that mean?"

"Johnny, please be sensible," Betty Bell suddenly said. She had guessed what he was going to say.

"I am," Johnny said grimly. "I mean that Manny Ladd is the one I have in mind. He was in love with my wife. All he did was sit around and stare at her. Maybe he thought he could kill me off and get her and my insurance." There was a sneer on his face.

"That isn't true, Officer," Betty Bell said firmly.

Her face was flushed.

"The hell it isn't," Johnny said. "I have eyes."

"What company carries your insurance?" Jason asked before a family quarrel could develop.

"Pitts."

"I hardly think," Jason continued, "that it was Manny Ladd who put that bullet in your gun. If it had been, he wouldn't have stood there and let himself be shot."

"That's right," Betty Bell said quickly. "Don't you see, Johnny?"

Johnny Bell scowled at her but didn't answer.

"It's getting late," Jason said, pulling a huge watch from his vest and looking at it. "I think Smith and I will run along and not bother you any more tonight."

"I hired Smith," Johnny said, "but I haven't seen him do anything to earn his money."

"Now," Jason said gently before Necessary could answer, "you didn't hire him to work twenty-four hours a day. If he gets a good night's rest, he can work better for you. I've got to get home and look after my geraniums."

"Geraniums!" exclaimed Johnny, contempt in his voice.

"That's right," Jason said happily. "I have some beautiful specimens. We'll see you tomorrow. Come on, Smith."

He and Necessary had just reached the door when Johnny suddenly remembered what had been said earlier.

"Wait a minute," he said. "You can't both go off and leave us alone like this. If that bullet was meant for me, the murderer may try again!"

"Yep," Jason said, nodding. "I imagine he might. Good night."

He and Necessary stepped out of the room and Jason closed the door gently.

CHAPTER FIVE

AND SO TO BED

JASON JONES and Necessary Smith stood on the sidewalk in front of the house.

"Maybe he's right," Necessary muttered, tweaking his nose. "Do you think it's a good idea to leave them alone like that? Of course, I don't know much about murder cases . . ."

"The captain," Jason said placidly, "posted some men in the neighborhood to follow any of them who gets a desire to travel. They'll take care of everything."

"What about that fellow inside?"

"Snell? He has to get the home addresses of everybody and a few little things like that and then he'll go home. He knows how I work."

"Shall I meet you here tomorrow?" Necesssary said eagerly.

"I'll tell you," Jason said. "Maybe you've got a car?"

"Yes."

Jason pulled a little notebook from his pocket and scribbled in it. Then he tore out the page and handed it to Necessary.

"You call for me about ten," he said. "Maybe we'll look around some, but the main thing is to wait."

"That's pretty late, isn't it?"

"Nope," Jason said. "I get up earlier, but I need a little time to give my geraniums."

"But don't you have to report?"

"Not when I'm on a case. Only when there's something to report. It's part of the agreement."

"Okay," Necessary said, giving up. "I'll pick you up at ten." He tucked the paper in his pocket.

"I wonder," Jason said, gazing up at the stars, "why this Johnny Bell was so careless as to give himself a motive for the murder of Manny Ladd . . ."

"You mean —" began Necessary.

"Have to take care of my geraniums," Jason Jones interrupted. "Good night."

He waddled up the street towards the subway.

CHAPTER SIX

A MATTER OF POLICY

AS SOON as the offices were open the next morning, Necessary Smith was at the Pitts National Insurance and Equity Company on Madison Avenue.

"I want to see the president," he told the girl at the reception desk.

"What's it about?"

"It's police business."

"You a detective?"

Necessary nodded.

"The president is out of town. You'll have to see one of the vice-presidents."

"All right," Necessary said.

The girl slid the glass panel shut and picked up her phone. But in spite of the glass panel, Necessary heard her say to the girl next to her: "Funny lookin' detective. Looks like Jimmy Durante, only taller and skinnier."

A moment later she slid back the panel.

"Mr. Morrison'll see you. Third door to the right."

Necessary walked down the hall and entered the third office. A well-dressed, middle-aged man looked up and smiled.

"You're from the police department?" he asked.

"Well, not exactly," Necessary admitted. "I'm a private detective. But I'm working with the police on this. I'd like to get some information."

The man's face had lost its smile at the mention of private detective.

"Sorry," he said briskly. "We don't give out any information."

"This isn't divorce or anything like that," Necessary said quickly. "It's murder. And I'm working with the police on it. If necessary you can call First Grade Detective Jason Jones and confirm it."

He said this with his fingers crossed, because he hoped it wouldn't be required. It would be quite a stunt if he could solve the case before Jones did. He might even get an extra bonus out of Bell.

"You say it's murder? Well — do you have identification?"

Necessary pulled out his wallet and displayed his license.

"Well, we might be able to help you. Is it this case I see in the papers this morning?"

Necessary nodded. He had seen the papers too and there was nothing in the stories except a routine piece on the case.

"What did you want to know?"

"Johnny Bell has a policy with you," Necessary said, uncrossing his fingers. "I'd like to know the amount and the name of beneficiary."

"That's simple enough," the executive said. He pushed a buzzer on his desk and scribbled something on a sheet of paper. A well-groomed blonde entered and he handed her the paper.

"We'll have it in a minute," he said as the girl left. "You say you're working on the case with the police?"

Necessary nodded.

"An interesting case, I imagine. I think I remember talking to young Bell

when he took out a policy here last year. Struck me as quite an energetic young chap. I suppose you have some definite clues?"

"Yeah," Necessary said.

"I fail to see how Bell's insurance touches on the case, however. The chap who was killed was merely Bell's press agent, wasn't he?"

"Yeah."

"Or are you going on the theory that this was an accident and perhaps Bell was the intended victim?" the executive guessed shrewdly.

Necessary pretended to be interested in some prints on the wall.

"An official secret, I suppose," the man said pleasantly. "Here we are," he added as the girl returned and placed the sheet of paper back on his desk. He glanced at it and up to Necessary.

"I see Bell has two policies with us," he said. "One for twenty-five thousand dollars, taken out two years ago, with his wife as beneficiary. The other was taken out last year, for fifty thousand dollars and names a Willard Duncan as the beneficiary. I see this last policy was sold through our Los Angeles branch. That what you want?"

"That'll do," Necessary said, concealing the elation he felt. "It may not mean anything but we like to know those things."

"If there is any danger to Bell, we'd appreciate knowing it," the executive said. "In fact, we'd even assign some of our men to help guard him. We have quite a bit at stake, as you can see."

"I don't think you have to worry," Necessary said. "We have the case well in hand. There might have been some danger to Bell yesterday, but there won't be now."

"You're sure?"

"You can take my word for it," Necessary said firmly. He really believed it, and besides he didn't want the insurance men fooling around and giving away the fact that he had been there. He didn't want to have to tell Jason just yet.

"Many thanks," he added.

"It's all right," the insurance man said. "Glad to help. If there is anything we can do, give me a ring."

"I will," Necessary said, and left before he could get more involved. When he reached the sidewalk, he discovered it was time he was starting for Jason's.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE

IF HE HAD speculated about Jason Jones' home life, Necessary Smith might have pictured him living in a stuffy apartment with a wife as fast as himself. And maybe a canary bird in the living room.

He was mildly disconcerted to discover that the address was that of a trim three-storey house. As he parked, he noticed that the sides of the third storey, and part of the roof, were of glass. His next and greatest surprise came after he rang the bell.

The door was opened by a slender, rather pretty, woman. She was as neat as Jason was sloppy. She smiled pleasantly.

"Mr. Jones in?" Necessary asked.

"Are you Necessary Smith?" she asked instead of answering him directly.

He nodded.

"Jason told me about you last night," she said. "I'm Mrs. Jones, but you can just call me Helen. Come in."

Necessary removed his hat and entered the house. It was extremely clean, he noticed, looking around.

"I know what you're thinking," Mrs. Jones said, smiling. "You are wondering how the house stays clean with Jason around. Whenever he's in the house, I admit, I have to follow him around with an ashtray."

Necessary colored and feebly tried to hide his embarrassment with a laugh.

"Jason's in the kitchen, having a second breakfast," she said. "Go on in and join him. Straight back through the house."

Necessary walked back along the hall. Just before he reached the kitchen, he was greeted.

"That you, Smith?" Jason called. "Good morning."

Necessary stopped in the kitchen door, halted by the spectacle before him.

Jason Jones sat at the kitchen table in his shirt sleeves and a pair of slacks. A napkin was tucked under his three chins. In front of him was a huge pile

of thick slices of bread, a plate of butter, a jar of red jelly and a jar of yellow jelly. An oversize cup of coffee was at his elbow.

"Nero Wolfe is a big eater too," was all Necessary could think to say.

"Nero Wolfe!" said Jason. "I can't even pronounce most of the things he eats, let alone eat them. I like simple food. And I'll bet I get as much pleasure from my wife's cooking as he does from that French chef's. Sit down and join me."

"Well, I might have a cup of coffee."

"No wonder you're so thin," Jason said. He was already pouring a cup of coffee. He pushed it across the table as Necessary sat down. Then he handed him a plate and a knife.

"Another secret of solving murders," he said, "is never to tackle a case on an empty stomach. I just came down from taking care of my geraniums and I always have a second breakfast then."

"I'm not very hungry," Necessary said, but he was weakening.

"You will be after you taste this," Jason said. "Helen baked this bread herself and it's hot. You met Helen as you were coming in?"

Necessary nodded, reaching for a slice of bread.

"The best cook I have ever known," Jason said, but there was no hint of bragging in his tones. "I've known a lot of cooks, some of them fancy ones, but none that could hold a candle to her. And bread is her specialty. When you have tasted that bread, Smith, you will be a discontented man the rest of your life. You know, you might say that Helen solves most of the tough murder cases in New York, because if it wasn't for the way she feeds me, I wouldn't have the heart to work on a case. Try that jelly."

Necessary buttered a hot slice of bread and then pulled over the jar of red jelly. He smeared the bread generously and took a big bite. He had to admit that Jason was probably right. He had never tasted anything as good.

"Knew that'd get you," Jason chuckled. "Not only the bread. Did you ever taste jelly like that?"

"It's a little like apple," Necessary said, "but it's got a Turkish Delight flavor I never tasted before. What is it?"

"You got a pretty good palate for a private detective," Jason said. "It does taste like Turkish Delight. The secret is geraniums, son. I got the recipe from a Greek fellow I arrested for murder. It turned out he was innocent but I didn't tell him till after he gave me the recipe. You take one geranium leaf and put it in the last three minutes the jelly is boiling. Then

you take it out just before you put the jelly in jars. Has to be the leaf of a sweet-scented geranium. None of these Armenian Cranesbills, Iberian Cranesbills, or Herb-Roberts."

Necessary nodded and reached for another slice of bread. He didn't know what it was all about, but as long as it made Jason happy, it was all right with him. In fact, he thought, Jason looked about twice as happy as he probably would if the case were solved. All three of his chins were quivering with pleasure.

Jason pushed the jar of yellow jelly across the table.

"Try this now," he said, and waited in boyish anticipation while Necessary spread it thickly over the bread.

If possible, it was even better than the apple jelly. His reaction must have showed on his face.

"Geraniums again," Jason said, making no attempt to conceal his satisfaction. "I got this recipe from a forger down in the old Tombs. I traded him the apple recipe for this one. You married, Smith?"

Necessary shook his head, his mouth being too full to talk.

"Well, you might want to make some jelly yourself some day, so I'll give you the recipe anyway. You make a quart of lemon jelly, the regular way, using calves' feet or the best leaf gelatine. While it's warm, you add a handful of large green peppermint geranium leaves. The peppermint geranium is the Pelargonium tomentosum. I'll give you some leaves any time you want them. Then you pass it through a jelly bag, add a glass of creme de menthe, and you've got it. Has to be served cold though."

"It's too much bother," Necessary said with a grin. "I'd rather come around and eat yours."

"You're welcome any time," Jason said promptly. The expression on his face changed subtly. "You maybe did a little sleuthing this morning, son?"

"Nothing important," Necessary muttered, pretending to concentrate on the slice of bread.

"Uh-huh," Jason said, but shrewdness and amusement were intermingled on his face. "Got any ideas yet?"

"A couple," Necessary admitted. "But I'd rather not mention them until I got a little more to go on."

"That's right," Jason said. He fished a pipe out of his trousers pocket and began stuffing it with tobacco from a pouch.

"What's on the program today?" Necessary asked.

"I suppose we'll have to talk to some of the witnesses," Jason said. "It's a waste of time, but they expect it of you. But first maybe we'll talk a little. You do any thinking about the murder itself?"

"If you mean about who did it — yes."

"Nope. Mean the fact that according to all the evidence the murder couldn't have happened. Nobody knew the gun was going to be used, nobody even knew the gun was in New York, nobody knew there was a shooting in the scene. Bell himself was the only one who knew those things and he looks smarter than to put himself out on a limb like that."

Jason held a match to his pipe and puffed. For a moment his face was obscured in clouds of smoke. Scented smoke, Necessary Smith's nose told him, but the scent wasn't unpleasant as was usually the case.

"What kind of tobacco is that?" he asked.

"I mixed it myself," Jason said proudly. "It's partly an old recipe from a book called *The Closet of Sir Kenelm Digby Opened*, published in 1669. His recipe called for an ounce of Balsam, ambergris, six drops of oil of aniseeds, seven drops of oil of cinnamon, three drops of oil of cloves, which he mixed in with the tobacco. I added some geranium leaves. Makes a right nice smell. Helen likes to sniff it in the house. But you didn't answer my question, son."

"I thought of it, but not long. It seemed to me we might waste too much time butting our heads into that stone wall. It might be quicker if we could find the motive for killing Manny Ladd, or trying to kill Johnny Bell."

"That's where you're wrong," Jason said, drawing complacently on his pipe. "You tell me how the murder was committed — that is how the bullet was arranged and how the murderer knew that was going to happen — and I'll name the murderer for you. That 'impossible' stunt is almighty important. Just let me tell you a little about impossible murders."

"Not a lecture!" Necessary exclaimed, throwing his head up in mock horror.

"Don't point that nose at me," Jason said. "The trouble with you, Smith, is that you're a man of action and most murders only call for a little logical thinking and then the patience to wait for the murderer's nerves to wear out. Murder is different than other crimes because you're dealing with amateurs instead of professionals."

"Proceed with the lecture," Necessary said. "I'll try to bear up under it."

"Why shouldn't I lecture on impossible murders?" Jason demanded. "If John Dickson Carr could have Dr. Fell lecture on locked rooms, and Clayton Rawson and H. H. Holmes can quote it, I guess I can give one little lecture of my own!"

"As I see it, murder which appears to happen under impossible conditions fits into one of several groups. Class A consists of those cases where the murder is committed by some mechanical means, much the same as in some locked rooms. In this class, the murderer may either be present or a hundred miles away."

"Class B includes those cases where the murderer kills his victim directly, without any nonsense, but through the use of misdirection is not noticed by the witnesses. Maybe you saw a movie where that was used. It was a Michael Shayne movie. The murderer used string, and maybe a reel — I don't remember — to fire two guns at the same time from different points. The murderer was in the room and the shots came from outside. Personally, I think that's carrying it a little too far, but you might call it a horrible example."

"In Class C the murder is actually committed by an innocent third person. This can involve a number of things. The third person may be under the influence of hypnosis, or may be playing a game or acting a part which calls for the use of a supposedly-harmless weapon. This involves a switching of the weapon, or the putting of teeth in it. If the weapon is switched, it can be done either before or after the crime. Or there may be two switches."

"In Class D the murderer commits the crime himself, but makes it appear as if he were the innocent bystander. This may or may not involve switching the weapon."

"Class E —"

"Does this go on all day?" Necessary interrupted.

"All right, if you're going to be stuffy about it," Jason said grumpily. "Our case fits into either Class C or Class D anyway. Either Karen Russell killed Manny Ladd or she was used by the person who killed Ladd intentionally, or meant to kill Bell and killed Ladd accidentally. That is because he, or she, couldn't stop the murder plan."

"You pays your money and you takes your choice," murmured Necessary.

"Exactly. Because, unfortunately, there is still the question of who was able to learn what the scene was going to be about and who knew that the gun was going to be used."

"If that's all that's standing in your way," Necessary said, "why not go on the basis that everybody was told what was going to happen. Then if it's so easy to narrow your classes down until they fit one person, you've got him."

"That would be all right, only I believe that Bell and June Hayes were telling the truth when they say they didn't reveal the plot to anyone."

"You think someone saw the script?"

"No."

"Then that can only mean that either Bell or Miss Hayes is guilty!" Necessary exclaimed.

"Maybe," Jason said. "And maybe somebody knew about that scene *before* it was written."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know," Jason said truthfully.

"I admit I don't know much about murder," Necessary said, "but it seems to me that we are getting too far into theory and too far away from what actually happened. Have you been in touch with Headquarters today?"

"Yeah."

"What about the detectives who were assigned to keep an eye on everyone?"

"Nothing happened," Jason said. "Ray Martin left shortly after we did and made his usual rounds of the night clubs. Karen Russell went straight home and was still there at the last report. Everyone else stayed over at Bell's and nobody was out of the house except Bennett Barlay who went to the corner for some cigarettes. Everyone was still staying put this morning except Gregor Fain who went back to his own apartment about nine o'clock."

He emptied his pipe and put it back in his pocket.

"Nothing there, eh?" Necessary said.

"Didn't expect anything," Jason said. He got up from his chair and sighed regretfully.

"I have to get dressed," he said, "so we can act the way policemen are supposed to. You have to make some move to earn your money from Bell and I suppose I have to keep busy or somebody'll be calling the Commissioner complaining about the way I waste taxpayers' money. I don't know why I stay on the Force. I swear I don't."

"The salary wouldn't have anything to do with it," Necessary said.

"No," Jason said seriously. "I have a little money of my own. I should retire and just raise geraniums."

"In the meantime, there is a murder," Necessary reminded him. "Run along and climb into one of those bags you call a suit."

"Gratitude," Jason said. "Here I offer to teach you the business and you repay me by making remarks about my size! . . . You wouldn't like to come upstairs and see the little greenhouse I have on the third floor, would you?"

"No," Necessary said firmly. "I enjoyed your geranium jelly very much but I'll be damned if I'll waste more time looking at a lot of silly flowers."

"You're going to work yourself to death," Jason predicted. "Burn yourself out. I'll be down in a few minutes. Pour yourself another cup of coffee."

CHAPTER EIGHT

AUTHOR OF MURDER

THEIR FIRST STOP was on East Ninth Street in Greenwich Village. Necessary Smith parked the car across from the apartment house and he and Jason climbed out.

Necessary wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen it himself. Thirty minutes earlier Jason Jones had come downstairs wearing a freshly-pressed blue suit and a smart-looking gray hat. In the short ride downtown, all signs of pressing had vanished from the suit and it was covered with ashes. The hat was a shapeless piece of felt.

The elevator carried them to the fifth floor of the apartment house and a moment later they were ringing the bell of the apartment occupied by Gregor Fain.

Gregor himself answered the door and grinned at the sight of the two.

"Well, if it isn't Slim Jim and Fatso," he exclaimed. "What can I do for the super-sleuths?"

"Entertain us," Jason said. He stepped forward and Fain had either to let him in or be struck by a solid wall of flesh. He let them in.

"I always suspected the police department lacked manners," he said, but he led the way through the apartment to his study. It was a large, light room with two bookcases, a studio couch and desk with typewriter. A sheaf of paper was beside the typewriter.

"What's this?" Jason asked, looking at one of the sheets.

"My newest opus," Fain said, "continuing the cases and cares of Freddy Hack, the world's greatest detective. I've just started it and it has to be delivered by the end of next week. That's a trifle under two weeks, and you are holding up the wheels of mystery and detection."

"What's this one about?" Jason asked.

"It's a new idea. I originally had one plotted I was going to call *The Howling Banshee.* But instead I'm going to write a different one, called *The Empty Gun.* The empty gun will be the murder weapon. Get it, Inspector Jones?"

"Detective Jones," Jason corrected, ignoring the tone Fain was using. "That should make a very interesting story. You got the solution worked out on it?"

"Yeah. I'm going to have the murder committed by a fat Homicide detective, named Jonah Brown."

"How are you going to arrange to have the empty gun loaded?" Jason asked.

"I'll have the fat detective switch the guns."

"Look," Necessary Smith said, butting into the conversation, "I don't like you. You're a fresh twerp and if you keep on making cracks, I'm going to take a poke at you just to see how easy you snap in two!"

"The detective who looks like de Bergerac," Gregor Fain said. "I must remember to use you in a story. Your name's Necessary Smith, isn't it?"

Necessary nodded, frowning.

"I don't know why Johnny hired you. You look about as necessary as an old-fashioned mustache cup."

Necessary took a step forward but Jason stopped him before he could swing his right.

"Now, now," Jason said. "Don't act like one of Fain's detectives." He turned to face Fain again. "With your experience as a writer of best-selling detective stories, you ought to be able to give us some help on this case."

Suspicion caused Gregor Fain to hesitate, but he could see no duplicity in the bland face of the fat detective.

"I might at that," he said, "if the police were to ask me."

Jason dropped down on the studio couch and fished a pack of cigarettes from his vest. He waited until his cigarette was burning before he spoke.

"Who do you think murdered Manny Ladd?" he asked.

Gregor Fain seated himself in front of his typewriter and grinned.

"This is one for the book," he said. "The New York Police Department asking America's leading mystery writer to solve their case for them. That'll be a good publicity blurb for my publishers to use on the new book jacket. . . . Well, Jonesy, if you really want to know, I'll tell you who the murderer is. But don't forget to give me credit when it turns out I'm right. It wasn't anybody who was in that house last night."

"No?"

"No. I guess you probably know that Johnny Bell isn't exactly faithful to his wife. If you don't you're the only one around who isn't in on it."

"Why does she stay with him then?"

"She's a dope," Gregor said. "She keeps thinking they'll make a go of it. But anyway, Johnny's latest heart-beat is this Karen Russell you saw last night. That's the reason he's starring her in his play. Just before she started making eyes at Johnny, she was chasing around with an actor named Kim Searles. A big blond guy, with a good-looking pan, and a build like Buster Crabbe. There were even rumors that they might get married. Then Johnny came along and Karen was too smart to pass up such a chance to get ahead. All of which burned this Searles guy up plenty."

"Where is he now?" Jason asked.

"Hollywood. But he followed her and Johnny East and was here up to about two weeks ago. He had a couple of stormy scenes with Johnny, making all kinds of threats. My guess is that he found some way of slipping that real bullet into the gun while he was at the house."

"You mean it was meant for Bell and got Ladd by mistake?"

"That's it."

"But how did this Searles know that Bell was going to write a scene in which that gun would be used?" Jason asked. "Bell probably didn't know it himself then."

"I don't think the scene had anything to do with it. Searles knew that Johnny likes to show off and he stuck the bullet in the gun just hoping that Johnny would stick the gun to his head to demonstrate that it was empty."

"You're sure that Searles is in Hollywood?"

"Not sure, but he's supposed to be."

"I sort of think you're wrong," Jason said. "This morning when I was taking care of my geraniums I was making a few deductions and it seemed impossible for it to be anyone else but one of those in the house."

"You were making deductions!" Gregor Fain said. "What were you trying to do — make like Sherlock Holmes?"

"No, I wouldn't think of comparing myself to Sherlock Holmes," Jason said placidly. "Sherlock was only the second greatest detective. If I must make comparisons, I'll have nothing but the best."

"This is blasphemy," Fain said mockingly, but with overtones of seriousness. "You can't talk like that about Sherlock. Who do you think was better?"

"Mycroft Holmes," Jason said.

"Oh, Sherlock's brother. But he only appeared a couple of times."

"That doesn't make him any less a great detective, just because Conan Doyle refused to write about him. Doyle was smart enough to know if he told more about Mycroft, Sherlock would look like an amateur. But Mycroft's laziness, which was given as the reason for his not solving more crimes, was the thing that made him a great detective. Sherlock wasted too much energy chasing around after his criminals. Mycroft drew his conclusions and then had sense enough to sit back and wait for developments. . . . You know Johnny Bell long?"

Fain blinked at the sudden change in the conversation but answered readily enough.

"About seven years. Since I was selling vacuum cleaners and he was down here in the Village trying to convince his landlord he was a genius. Then we both started up about the same time."

"You don't make as much money as he does?"

"Not quite, but I get along."

"You know him well, I guess," Jason remarked.

"Better than anyone else," Fain said. "I'm probably his only friend. I understand Johnny and get along with him okay. Johnny's got a great sense of humor."

"Yes?"

"Yeah. Did you ever hear of David Manley?"

"Name sounds familiar. A writer, is he?"

"Yeah. He writes a lot for the pulps but he's had a book or two published. He's a dope. Well, a couple of years ago when Johnny sold his first serial to Hollywood for five thousand, he got a great idea. He called up Manley and pretended to be MGM calling and wanting to buy a serial of Manley's for five thousand dollars. It was a scream! Manley got so excited he spluttered

and couldn't talk. But finally managed to say it would have to be handled through his agent."

"What finally happened?" Jason asked.

"After a few hours, Johnny called him back and explained that it had been him and that he had sold his serial for five thousand and merely wanted Manley to be as happy as he was. . . . What's the matter? You guys don't think that's funny?"

"No!" growled Necessary.

"No sense of humor," Fain scoffed. "Johnny's a card, all right."

"Some card," Necessary said sourly.

"Okay, so you don't like him. But I do."

"Do you like his wife?" Jason asked.

"I told you she's a dope."

"How about Bennett Barlay?"

"He's a dope too," Fain said scornfully. "If he weren't, he wouldn't be writing those stories for Johnny. They're better detective stories than Johnny ever wrote and he could sell them under his own name. But he keeps on ghosting for Johnny."

"What do you think of Willard Duncan?" Necessary asked.

"Duncan's okay, even though he's a little of a dope too. He's one of the best agents going and he actually earns about half of Johnny's money for him."

"He'd be in a bad fix if Bell were to go to another agent, wouldn't he?" Necessary asked casually.

"Anybody'd be in a bad fix if they lost two hundred bucks a week," Fain said, "and that's about what Duncan makes out of Johnny. He's completely ignored his other clients. He has a few straggling writers who are really handled by Duncan's secretary, but they don't amount to anything. He'd have a tough time building up a new list now. And don't think he doesn't know it. He goes around half the time in a cold sweat just thinking that Johnny might leave him."

"I don't blame him," Necessary said. "Has there ever been any danger of that?"

"Well, about every six months Johnny threatens to leave him and go to somebody else. But he really only does it to watch Duncan squirm. Johnny knows that no other agent would do so much for him."

"But Duncan maybe believes that Bell isn't kidding?"

"Probably." Fain was beginning to get bored with the questioning and casting glances at his typewriter.

"You're a good friend of Bell's, huh?" Jason asked. He had been sitting quietly, staring at the ceiling while Necessary asked questions.

"Yeah."

"The only one, huh?"

"That's right."

"Seems odd," Jason commented.

"Oh, I don't — say, wait a minute! Is the wind blowing in that direction? You two flatfeet didn't by chance come around here because you think maybe I did the bang-banging last night because I wanted to bump off Johnny?"

"Nothing like that," assured Jason.

Fain threw back his head and laughed.

"I really believe you had some dumb notion like that in mind," he said. "Trying to play a little Mycroft Holmes on me. Don't worry. If I ever wanted to commit a murder, I'd do a better job than that. Would you believe it, I know a perfect way of committing a murder! Really perfect!"

"Why don't you use it in a story?" Necessary asked.

"No good. If you use a perfect murder method, you haven't any story. You can only solve it by having the murderer break down and confess — which is weak. It's terrible to have a really perfect murder method and not be able to use it. I've been going nuts trying to think what I could do with it. Maybe I'll still have to commit a murder, just to use it. And if you crumbs don't get out of here in about ten seconds, I'll use it on you."

"We were just going," Jason said dryly. He heaved himself up from the couch and started for the door. Necessary followed him and Fain ushered them out.

"Any time you need my advice, just let me know," he told them at the door. "Consultations from four to six, hereafter, though. I'll let you know how *my* fat detective makes out." He slammed the door.

"Nice — like a rat," Necessary grunted.

"He merely attempts to follow in the seven-league stride of his hero — Johnny Bell," Jason remarked as they headed for the elevator.

CHAPTER NINE

THE INSIDE

NECESSARY parked in front of the *Argus* building.

"I'll tell you," Jason said as they walked into the building. "You ought to have the hang of it by now. You ask Ray Martin the questions."

"What questions?" Necessary asked.

"Any questions. It won't make much difference."

"But it won't be official," Necessary protested, rubbing his nose thoughtfully.

"Who cares?" Jason asked. He tried to brush the ashes from his vest and only succeeded in smearing them. "Doesn't make much difference what you ask people. They'll only tell you what they want to anyway. But maybe it'll give you an idea."

"You don't want any ideas?"

"Ideas are misleading. You talk and I'll just sort of absorb. Ain't no use of both of us wearing ourselves out. Besides, I get better results when I just wait for the murderer to make a mistake."

"Or for somebody else to solve the case for you," Necessary said with a grin that took any sting out of the statement.

"Maybe," grunted Jason.

Ray Martin was in his private office on the fifth floor of the *Argus* building. As they entered, he took a sheet of paper from his typewriter and carefully turned it over on the desk.

"I wondered how long it would take you two to show up," he said.

He was completely sober but there was very little difference in his appearance from the night before. Only the odor of Scotch was missing.

"What made you so sure that we'd be here?" Necessary asked while Jason gazed with a bucolic stare at photographs of celebrities on the wall.

"Cops always come to me when they want a little dirty linen displayed."

"You mean you know of some in this case?" Necessary asked quickly.

"What's this?" Ray Martin asked, with a shrewd glance towards the silent

Jason. "Jones, is this long-nosed private detective running the Homicide Bureau now?"

"He's just the official curiosity," Jason answered without taking his eyes from the photographs.

"You didn't answer the question," Necessary pointed out.

"It depends on what you call dirty linen," the columnist countered.

"Let's sneak up on it from another direction," Necessary said, grinning. "You said you knew Manny Ladd a long time?"

"Yes."

"Did you see him often since they returned from the coast?"

"Quite often," Martin said.

"And he probably talked to you about Bell and the others in the house?"

"Yes," Martin said. "Both on the record and off. That house was a psychiatrist's paradise and it wasn't much of a secret to anyone who was around there. Bell's big passion of the moment is Karen Russell. He makes it a practice never to be without a gal friend. Manny was in love with Betty Bell, but she's strictly on the up-and-up so nothing ever came of it. Bell's secretary, the little blonde, was carrying the torch for Manny. And I forgot to mention that Karen Russell is supposedly in love with an actor, but smart enough to know which side of the bread her butter's on."

"Sounds like a double triangle," Necessary said.

"You're not kidding," Martin answered. "And everybody who was carrying the torch had somebody else waiting to fall off the tree."

"So Bell was right when he said that Ladd was in love with his wife," Necessary said. "Maybe she was beginning to weaken and Bell decided to get rid of a rival. He was the one person that knew about the gun and that it would be used."

There was a grunt from Jason but when Necessary glanced at him he was staring innocently out the window.

"If you were asking a question," Martin said, "I'm not answering — just now."

Necessary Smith ignored the suggested meaning in the remark. He had just remembered something from the night before.

"Last night," he said, "when Jason asked about persons that might like to kill Bell, you muttered something about hundreds of them. But you also told us that you didn't know Bell very well."

"Right, both times. I didn't know Bell well, but I did know of him. I

knew a lot of things, as do dozens of others, that I couldn't print because I couldn't prove them. At the same time, Manny was my friend and was making his living from Bell."

"Not having proof was the main reason, wasn't it?" Jason asked, coming into the conversation again.

"Sure," Martin admitted with a grin. "If I could make circulation by it, I'd turn my grandmother in — if I could prove anything."

"Manny Ladd was strictly a straight guy, wasn't he?" Jason asked.

"One of the few."

"He was the type who, if he knew you were getting away with something, would have showed you up no matter what it cost him, wasn't he?"

"Wait a minute, Jones," Ray Martin said. "Do you mean that you have a hare-brained idea that I had something to do with Manny's death?"

"Nope," Jason said calmly. "Just trying to find out if Manny was the kind I had him sized up to be." He went back to gazing out the window.

"He was," Martin said shortly, still not sure that Jason hadn't meant more than he claimed.

"If he was that type," Necessary Smith said, noticing that Jason had apparently lost interest in the columnist, "and Bell was as big a heel as everyone says, why did Ladd keep on working for him?"

"Manny was always threatening to give me proof that Bell was such a louse the printing of it would ruin him. In fact, he was talking about it again yesterday. But I don't think he meant it, as much as I would have liked to run the proof. What was the use. The Johnny Bells are legion — you couldn't fix them all if you wanted to."

"We got a little glimpse of Bell, the practical joker," Necessary said, "and I admit I don't like Bell too well, but I haven't seen anything about him that makes him a likely murder victim. Unless it's his women."

"That's enough, with Johnny," Ray Martin said. "But there's plenty of other things too. In his earlier days, Johnny Bell was caught in plagiarism about six times, but he's smarter now. He makes a practice of 'helping' young writers. He invites them to live in his home while he helps them on the road to success. They move in with their baggage and their ideas. Bell lets them keep the baggage. If they have a lot of ideas, they maybe stay six months. In the meantime, Bell gives them problems. He'll tell them to outline a plot for *American* or *Collier's*, then for the movies, then for a book. After that he starts them on the cycle again. When they start running down

a little he kicks them out and in a couple of months the ideas start popping up under the by-line of Johnny Bell. He had told the kids the ideas were too amateurish, so they didn't think anything of it until they read it."

"Bell is a real vampire. He lives on the literary blood of others. I've had writers tell me that when they meet Bell he automatically says 'Give me an idea' like some guys will ask for a cigarette."

"But can't these young writers ever prove he took their ideas?" Necessary asked.

"They've tried that too. A couple of them sued but Bell not only convinced the court that the ideas were his, but he made the writers look like such heels that nobody has tried it since. He's clever, don't forget that. And he's a good writer when someone else gives him the story. But he never wrote an original story in his life."

"Incidentally, those two who did sue him were never able to get anywhere with their writing after suing him. So they might be candidates for a little quiet murdering."

"Then there's this guy, Bennett Barlay. He's had some pretty raw deals from Bell and isn't exactly getting bouquets now. He sells his own stories under Bell's name and Bell makes twice as much money. For a while he was also selling stories under his own name, but Bell went around to the magazine editors and told them if they ran any more of Barlay's stories, they'd never get his, Bell's, name in one of their magazines again. Bell's name means circulation, so they obeyed."

"How come none of this never appears — maybe in a column like yours?"

"Because of proof. None of these people want to make an official squawk. If you ask Barlay, he'll tell you that he gets treated all right. Everybody remembers what happened to the two guys who sued and they don't want to take any chances. . . . Would you like more suspects?"

"Go ahead," Necessary said.

"Well, there's his wife. She certainly has enough motivation to kill Bell. She's been humiliated by him from coast to coast. He flaunts his girl friends in her face, just as he is doing now. Any other woman would have cut his throat before this.

"If it wasn't for the fact that he's making about two hundred a week from Bell, Willard Duncan might occasionally have a yen to do away with him. When Bell's in the mood, he makes Duncan perform like a pet dog. Duncan has to run errands, get rid of the girls, introduce him to new ones, and

any other dirty chores that Bell can think up. If Duncan shows any reluctance, Bell starts talking about getting a new agent."

"June Hayes has what would be a good motive for some. She would have been in the movies last year, instead of working her head off as his secretary, if he had put in a good word for her. Instead, he did the opposite and she never got beyond the screen test. She recently discovered his share in that.

"I imagine a good psychiatrist would discover that Gregor Fain really hates Bell although he's supposed to be his friend. Every success that Fain has had, Bell has topped him. Fain has finally wound up being Bell's faithful shadow. And faithful shadows sometimes bite the hand that leads them."

"Bell may have already found some way of putting the screws to this George Porter — providing him with a motive. If he hasn't, he will."

"You left out Karen Russell," Necessary said ironically.

"She probably has no reason yet," Martin said, "because she's getting a chance at stardom. But he'll provide her with a motive — if he lives long enough."

"If you add to these all the writers I mentioned, plus all the boyfriends and husbands of discarded girls, you'll have a tidy little list of suspects who might have planned to kill Bell and got Manny instead. Enough to keep you busy for a few days anyway."

"You left out one other person who was present," Jason remarked from the window.

"Who?"

"Ray Martin."

"I'm beginning," Martin said, "to think that you're over-rated as a detective, Jones. First you let a long-nosed private detective run your investigation for you and next you want to accuse me of murder. If I had wanted to kill Johnny Bell, there wouldn't have been any mistake. Besides, if I tried to kill all the phony heels that I know, I'd get nothing else done. I'd be wading in gore up to my ears. I see so many heels that half the time I feel like a sidewalk."

"I was just wondering," Jason said.

"You mean that's what you were doing over by the window all the time? Wondering if I was the killer?"

"No," Jason admitted. "I was worrying about my geraniums. A couple of my Purple Unique specimens looked a little sickly this morning. I don't know why I waste my time with these murder cases." He sighed.

"I'm beginning to wonder myself," Ray Martin said, grinning at Necessary.

"You've said a lot," Necessary said to Martin, "and at the same time you haven't said much. I didn't notice you giving any of your own opinions."

"The New York *Argus* pays me one thousand dollars a week, counting the syndicate money, for my opinions, such as they are, and you want me to hand them out to you gratis."

"You mean you have an idea?" Jason Jones asked.

"I have."

"And you wouldn't want to part with it?"

"For the small sum of two cents," Ray Martin said, "you can buy a copy of tomorrow's *Argus* at ten o'clock tonight and read what I think. If you read very carefully, you may get a clue that will solve the case for you."

"I could take you to the station," Jason said, staring dreamily at Martin.

"And make a damn fool of yourself," Martin retorted. "All I have to do is say that I haven't any idea. I could get the tip later after I leave the station."

"I suppose so," Jason said tranquilly.

"I'll give you a break," Ray Martin said. "Fifteen minutes before the paper hits the street, I'll call you up and tell you anything I know."

"Wouldn't like to make it thirty minutes before?"

"You sound like a Yankee trader," Martin said. "Okay. Now beat it, both of you. My time's worth a lot of money."

"It must be nice to be rich," sighed Jason. Without bothering to say goodbye, he waddled towards the door. Necessary uncoiled his long legs from around the chair and followed.

"You think he knows something?" Necessary asked as they were going down in the elevator.

"Thinks he does," Jason grunted.

"Maybe he just wanted to make us think so," Necessary said. "Sometimes these columnists get so filled with the idea that they're on the inside that they start making up scoops."

"Nope," Jason said, shaking his head. "He thinks he knows something. But I wouldn't worry about it. He only thinks that there wasn't any mistake in the killing of Manny Ladd."

"How do you know?" challenged Necessary.

"He was doing too good a job telling us all about the people who would

like to kill Johnny Bell. If he really thought that one of them had tried to kill Bell, he would have saved it for his column."

"I didn't think of that," Necessary admitted.

"Got to call Homicide," Jason added and squeezed into one of the phone booths.

CHAPTER TEN

THE GHOST

IT WAS already one-thirty. It seemed such a short time since they had left Jason's home. Necessary leaned against the counter and waited.

There was nothing really tangible in the way of clues, but Necessary was nursing an idea that continued to fatten on the information they gathered — meager as it was. If he could only stumble on some way that the murderer could have learned what the third scene of Bell's play was to be about. That, he had to admit, was a stumbling block.

He was a little puzzled by Jason Jones. Evidently, from the remarks made by Jones and confirmed by Ray Martin, he did have a reputation for solving murder cases. Yet he apparently was making no attempt to arrive at any conclusions from the information they already had and, in fact, seemed to be half asleep most of the time. If he seemed to think of anything, it was of his geraniums.

At the same time, Necessary had noticed a shrewdness in his eyes at a time when he appeared most somnolent. Jason Jones, Detective First Grade, was indeed an enigma — one which was beginning to bother Necessary Smith almost as much as the question of how the murder of Manny Ladd had been committed.

Jason came out of the phone booth, his fat face Buddha-like in its lack of expression.

"Have to make another stop," he said. "It won't mean anything but I suppose we have to play up to people's whims. I wish I had a slice of Helen's bread . . ."

"Where to now?" Necessary asked as they went out to the car.

"To West Twenty-Second Street. Where this Bennett Barlay lives. He left

Bell's house about a half hour ago and went to his own apartment. Then he called Homicide and asked for me. Told them if they got in touch with me in the next hour to have me come over to his place."

Necessary made a U-turn and headed West.

"He didn't say what he wanted?" he asked.

"Nope. Probably thinks he has a clue and sneaked out of the house to tell me. Told the desk sergeant for me not to come unless it was in an hour, so he probably has to go back. You notice anything funny about this case, Smith?"

"You mean the way the murder was committed?" Necessary asked.

"Not that. But we got a lot of mystery story writers. Bell used to be one and Barlay and Fain both are. Don't like it."

"Why?"

"A murder being committed under circumstances that makes it seem impossible," Jason grunted, spilling ashes from his cigarette all over himself again. "That don't sound like an ordinary guy who just wants to get rid of somebody. Sounds like a mystery writer dreaming up a plot, doesn't it?"

"A little," admitted Necessary. "But that's a little fantastic too. It seems to me that a mystery writer would be the same as any other guy if he wanted to kill somebody. He'd forget all about his tricks and just get the murder over in the quickest way possible."

"Not if he'd been dreaming up plots all his life and hadn't been satisfied with the way they turned out," Jason said. "If you'd read mysteries you'd know that a mystery writer likes nothing better than thinking up a new gag that will stick his readers. Go to any lengths. All sorts of locked rooms and gadgets. That's about all we need to make this perfect now . . ."

"What?"

"A locked room. If I have to contend with any locked rooms at my age, I swear I'll resign and give all my time to my geraniums. I will!"

"What's the difference between a locked room and an impossible situation?" Necessary wanted to know.

But Jason Jones was so lost in the contemplation of handing in his resignation it is doubtful if he even heard the question. Necessary drove the rest of the way in silence.

Bennett Barlay lived in a two-room apartment on West Twenty-Second Street, just past Eighth Avenue. The big, blond writer met them at the door. He looked nervous.

"I was afraid you wouldn't get here," he said as they entered.

"The police and bills always arrive," Jason told him, at the same time taking the shortest distance to the only overstuffed chair in the apartment. He dropped into it, bouncing ashes off his vest to the rug. "Got something on your mind, son?"

"In a way, yes," Bennett Barlay said.' 'It may not be important but I thought you ought to know. And I didn't want to tell you in front of Johnny. He's a little touchy on some subjects."

"That's news," Jason said. "What is this big clue?"

"I wouldn't have thought anything of it," Barlay said, "only you made a point last night of trying to find out how anyone could have known that the shooting was in the play and that Johnny was going to use the gun. You see, I knew."

"Uh-huh," Jason said, nodding. "Meaning that if you knew, others could know too?"

"That's right."

"How did you know?"

"I knew it was going to be in the play — the shooting, I mean," Barlay said, "because I wrote it."

"You know," Jason complained to Necessary, "that's what we missed. I knew that there was something in one of Martin's statements that we didn't get. And we should have. It was when he told us that Bell never had an idea in his life that he didn't get from somebody else. Right off, we should have wanted to know where he got the idea for this play. We should have, but we didn't. Maybe you better take up geraniums too."

Necessary scratched his long nose and felt foolish. At the same time he felt elated. Here was an explanation of how the murderer could have gained the information — the one thing he needed — yet he had missed it when it was right in front of him.

"Sorry to interrupt you, son," Jason said to Barlay. "Go ahead. You mean you wrote the play?"

"No, just the plot. About a year ago I wrote a novelet for *Detective Yarns Weekly* which had almost the exact plot he's been following in the play. Johnny gets sort of mad if you say anything to him about it. But that story was printed in the magazine and was probably read by a hundred thousand people."

"All you have to do now is tell us that all of them had a reason to kill

Manny Ladd or Johnny Bell and we'll be set," Necessary said, grinning.

"Published under your name or Bell's?" Jason asked.

"Under Johnny's, of course," Barlay said. "It was called *Thumbs Up For Murder* because of that business of the thumb on the ceiling. I guess maybe Johnny read it at the time and then forgot that he'd read it."

"And this girl shoots the fellow the same way as in the play?" Jason asked.

Barlay nodded.

"Even if it was the same in the story," Necessary said, "how could anyone tell that part was coming next in the play?"

"I didn't stop to think about it," Barlay said, "but I could have guessed. The way he did the first two scenes followed right along the path of the story and the shooting was next."

"And the gun?" Jason asked quietly.

"I didn't know about the gun, but it would be easy to guess that Johnny would use a gun in the scene. That is, if you knew Johnny. We all acted out the first two scenes and wherever it was possible Johnny made us use props. Mostly small props. He said it helped him get a clearer picture. Besides, Johnny is crazy about guns. I remember he used to always be fooling around with those little watch-chain guns that shoot a blank. So if somebody knew he had brought that gun from Hollywood, they could be pretty sure that Johnny would use it."

"Sure," Jason said, "but now the question is who knew about it. You wouldn't be having any ideas along that line, would you?"

"No," Barlay said, quickly.

"You know," Jason said reflectively, "there's been a bit of speculation as to whether the murderer really meant to kill Manny Ladd or whether maybe he had his eye on Bell and something went wrong. What do you think?"

"I don't know," Barlay said. "It seems hardly possible that anyone would want to kill Manny. He was a swell guy. And there's always people who are envious of anyone as successful as Johnny."

"Are you?"

"No."

"What you really meant a second ago was that Johnny Bell is hated by a lot of people and Manny Ladd wasn't?" Jason asked.

Again it was Jason who was asking all the questions. Necessary leaned back in his chair and listened with the superior smile of a man who knows what others are guessing at.

"I guess so," Barlay admitted.

"Do you?"

"No."

"There are a lot of cops," Jason said reflectively, "who would take you down to the station, put you under a bright light and keep asking you that question . . . But not me. It would take too much energy. So I guess you're telling the truth. You wouldn't have any idea about who among that bunch last night would hate Bell enough to want to see him stretched out?"

"No," Barlay said, without conviction.

"I was afraid you wouldn't," Jason said, sighing. "Got any other little tidbits you wanted to tell us?"

"That was all. I have to get back to the house right away. I told Johnny I had to come over to get some clothes. He wants to talk to me about some new stories for the magazines."

"We have to go too," Jason said, but he made no move to get out of the chair. "Comfortable furniture you have, son. . . . If you had to make a guess, you wouldn't say that the murderer was after Bell, would you?"

Bennett Barlay hesitated and then shook his head.

"It doesn't seem so — now," he said.

Necessary Smith's grin grew broader.

"By that 'now'," Jason said, "you maybe mean that if Johnny Bell was to be killed because somebody hated him, it would have happened a long time ago?"

"A lot of people don't like him," Barlay admitted.

"Uh-huh," Jason said.

He pushed himself up from the chair and walked to the door. He waited until Necessary was out in the hall and then he looked back at Barlay.

"Don't worry," he said. "We won't say anything to Bell about you telling us of that story. We'll just pretend we found it by the Sherlock Holmes method."

"Thanks."

"As a matter of fact," Jason said, "I don't think it makes much difference anyway. Everything might have happened the same way even if you hadn't written that story. But you tell us any more little goodies that occur to you."

He followed leisurely behind Necessary down the stairs.

"I wasn't built for all this walking around," he complained when they were in Necessary's car again. "Too much of Helen's bread. You got an office?"

"In the Empire State Building," Necessary said.

"Got any comfortable chairs there?"

"Two of them."

"All right. Let's go up there. . . . Then you can tell me why you're smirking all of a sudden. If you don't get the chance, you'll probably just blow up and burst."

"I know who the murderer is and why," Necessary announced triumphantly. "I should have stumbled on it before. All you have to do is figure out the person closest to Bell, which —"

But Jason wasn't listening. He had leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes peacefully.

Necessary put his soul into one quiet damn and then drove towards his office.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NUMBER TWO

NECESSARY SMITH'S office was just as it had been when it was turned over to him by the employer with a sense of humor. There were two medium-sized rooms and a reception foyer. The rooms were expensively furnished — much more so than they would have been if Necessary had paid the bill. He had not changed the offices, but he had changed the business.

His former employer had made most of his money from divorce cases. In fact, the business had been so lucrative that he had found it necessary to employ three regular men and a secretary. But Necessary had been so sick of peeping into private lives that, when he took over the business, he made it a rule never to take a divorce case. This had meant doing away with the employees and making considerable less money, but he felt that the sacrifice was worth it.

He still retained the secretary, a vixenish young woman with an un-

bridled tongue and a fondness for Anglo-Saxon expletives that still made Necessary uncomfortable when she found the need to use them. If nothing else, he was in awe of her vocabulary. She was completely efficient, which was fortunate, because Necessary dreaded to think what she would say if he had to fire her.

With the exception of Elsie Poll, his private detective agency was a one-man outfit. Necessary was the one man. Still he managed to make a pretty good living from insurance cases.

"Any calls?" Necessary asked Miss Poll as he and Jason entered.

"Who the hell would want to call you?" she countered without looking up from her magazine.

Her response was so gentle compared with what she usually said that Necessary felt considerably relieved as he led the way into his private office and closed the door.

"A hen-pecked bachelor," Jason Jones chuckled. He dropped into the big chair by Necessary's desk, lit a cigarette and closed his eyes.

Necessary tossed his hat in the wastebasket and sat down in the chair back of his desk.

"Elsie is a rugged individualist," he said wryly.

"You were saying something when we left Barlay's," Jason said.

"I said I knew who the murderer was."

"I hope you're wrong."

"What?" Necessary exclaimed. "Why do you hope I'm wrong?" he added indignantly.

Jason chuckled, setting his three chins to quivering.

"It's too early in the story," he said. "You can't solve the murder now."

"Well, I have," Necessary said stubbornly. It wasn't that he lacked a sense of humor, but he hated to have Jason spoil his big moment by not taking it seriously.

"Who?"

"Willard Duncan is the murderer," Necessary said. He felt so good about it that he didn't even bother to try holding the name back until the last.

Jason opened one eye briefly, then closed it again.

"Proof?" he said.

"We may not be able to prove it just yet," Necessary admitted. "That is, we'll have to work on that some more. But he's the one."

"You're going to be difficult," Jason muttered. "All right. So Bell's literary agent killed Manny Ladd. Take it from there."

"I also said, back in the car when you were going to sleep," Necessary said, "that all you had to do was look for the person closest to Johnny Bell. A lot of people might have jumped to the conclusion that that would mean his wife, his girl friend or Fain. But actually Willard Duncan was the closest to him. It was Duncan who was always in on his stories and either knew what Bell had in mind or had suggested it to him. He was the one — and probably the only one — who really knew the way Bell's mind worked on a story. And that was an important factor in making the murder fit in with the third scene of the play. Even if someone else knew the plot, they'd still have to be pretty sure of the way Bell would shape it, in order to make plans."

"If I grant that's true," Jason said, "it still dosen't show why Duncan killed Manny Ladd."

"He didn't mean to," Necessary said. "He intended killing Johnny Bell and probably will try again if we don't stop him first."

"The way I figure it, Duncan either knew that Bell was going to use that plot from the story that Barlay wrote or he suggested that it would make a good play. I wouldn't be surprised if he suggested it with this in mind. Duncan was also out in Hollywood and knew about the gun that Bell had. Now we know that the gun was in Bell's study in a trunk, but we never stopped to think that Duncan is the only one besides June Hayes who would be in the study to any great extent. He was the person who could paw around among Bell's things in the study without anyone thinking anything of it. He was Bell's agent and probably had to look up stories all the time. So he had plenty of opportunity to find the gun and load it."

Necessary hesitated a moment and then continued.

"He knew, as did the others, that Bell was a show-off. *But* it was Duncan who emphasized that perhaps the gun was loaded and so caused Bell to put the gun to his own head and pull the trigger. He had probably done things like that before and Duncan felt pretty sure he would again. And he felt safe in suggesting the gun might not be empty. It had the effect of directing suspicion away from him while really accomplishing what he wanted. Very clever."

"But he made the mistake of putting the real bullet in the empty chamber of the gun instead of taking out one of the dummies and placing

the bullet there. If he hadn't made that mistake, Bell would have been dead. But Bell remembered that the one chamber was supposed to be empty and didn't think of pulling the trigger the sixth time. I'll bet that after his original purpose had failed, Duncan was one of those who suggested they shouldn't use the gun. If you remember, it was said that they had a 'feeling' the gun shouldn't be used. The source was probably forgotten, but five'll get you twenty that Duncan was that source.

"When Bell insisted on using the gun anyway, there was nothing that Duncan could do but sit and watch Ladd be killed. If he exposed the bullet in the gun, he would also expose himself."

"Beautifully told," Jason said, but he still seemed half asleep as though not particularly impressed. "But you forgot one little item. If Willard Duncan killed Bell, he'd be cheating himself out of two hundred dollars every week."

"I don't think so," Necessary said. "You'll remember Fain told us that Bell had threatened several time to leave Duncan and go to another agent. I'll bet that if we check on it, Bell has made arrangements to do just that. Duncan found it out in some way and saw that ten thousand a year slipping out of his grasp."

"That's still weak motivation," Jason protested. "Why kill him for that? With Bell dead, he's sure of losing that income. As long as Bell stayed alive there was a chance he could change his mind. Fain also said that Bell had threatened Duncan just to annoy him. If Bell did plan such a move, he's probably already changed his mind."

"You're forgetting that Duncan practically had to play servant to Bell. He had to do all the dirty chores and Bell probably rubbed it in every chance he got — being that kind of guy. That in itself would be enough to make a lot of people commit murder. Then, on top of that, he discovers he's going to lose his income from Bell. So it was perfectly natural that he should want to kill him."

"Maybe natural," Jason grunted. "But it's still a pretty flimsy motive."

"There's one more thing," Necessary said, grinning with triumph. "The minute Johnny Bell is dead, Willard Duncan collects fifty thousand dollars!"

Jason opened one eye again and stared at Necessary questioningly.

"About a year ago," Necessary said, "Bell took out an insurance policy for fifty thousand dollars with the Pitt Insurance and Equity Company, naming Willard Duncan as beneficiary."

"Where did you pick up that little morsel?" Jason asked.

"At the insurance company. I was up there this morning while you were watering your geraniums — or whatever one does to geraniums."

Necessary was disappointed. Jason didn't seem as impressed as he should have been.

"You water them," Jason said. He had closed his eye again. "I thought you had a look in your eye like a cat with a plate of liver when you showed up. Keeping secrets from the police department, were you?"

"Only until it fitted in with something else," Necessary said. "You didn't know about it, did you?" he added suspiciously.

Jason shook his head.

"But I sort of thought you'd go there early this morning," he said. "You look like the nervous kind who can't stand not to be doing something. I was hoping you'd go and save me the trouble. Told them you were working with the police, I expect?"

"Yeah."

"They get upset?"

"A little," admitted Necessary. "The man I talked with wanted to know if we needed any of their men to help guard Bell."

"Probably have a bunch of insurance men in our hair anyway," Jason remarked. "Nothing worse than insurance men for getting in the way."

"Won't you admit that's a strong enough motive?" Necessary asked.

"Common enough practice," Jason remarked. "If, say, you were making a lot of money from something I did, it would seem natural to take out a policy to see that you didn't lose too much if I were to die suddenly."

"Also perfectly natural to want to collect the fifty thousand if I found out you were going to leave me," Necessary said. "That's as much money as Duncan would make from Bell in the next five years. If you think I'm wrong, why don't you say so?"

"Don't think anything," Jason said. "You might be right. Then again you might be wrong. Sounds logical enough. But then I've always been suspicious of things that sound logical ever since an algebra teacher in high school proved to me that one equals zero, or some such thing. How you going to prove it?"

"I don't know," Necessary admitted. "I told you that before. Unless maybe we can bluff Duncan into confessing. . . . There weren't any fingerprints on that shell, was there?"

"Not a print," Jason said. "Didn't expect any. A murderer smart enough to figure out a scheme like that wouldn't be likely to leave any fingerprints around. Be kind of nice for you, if you're idea was right and you could save Bell's life, wouldn't it?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You're working for Bell," Jason said. "If you saved his life, you could charge a nice fee. . . . Think of getting five hundred dollars just as a retainer. Got any idea why he hired you in the first place?"

Necessary shook his head.

"Only that he said somebody was trying to pull a fast one. Maybe he had an idea that Duncan would try to kill him and that's the reason why he put me on the murder."

"We'll have to remember to ask him," Jason said. "But don't you pay too much attention to Johnny Bell, son."

"Meaning what?"

"I don't exactly know," Jason said. "Only it seems that Bell is the sort of fellow that might take up too much of your thoughts if you'd let him. I know a guy who built a greenhouse just to cultivate poison ivy. Doesn't grow anything else. Can't even talk about anything else. I never eat salad when I have dinner at his house."

"But what are you going to do about Duncan?" Necessary asked.

"Nothing. Just wait and see what happens. If he's the murderer, he'll make a mistake pretty soon."

"But he's liable to kill Bell."

"A lot of people wouldn't consider that a mistake," Jason observed. "But I got a hunch that Johnny Bell will live to be about a hundred and never change. You didn't see your boss today?"

"Bell? No."

The phone rang.

"Maybe that's him now," Necessary said. He picked up the receiver and answered.

"Yeah, he's here," he said. He shoved the receiver towards Jason. "For you."

Jason struggled upright and took the receiver. He listened while the phone made squawking sounds, occasionally grunting, and then handed it back to Necessary.

"I knew I wouldn't get a chance to rest," he said. "We got to go over to Bell's again."

"What's happened?"

"Another murder. I wasn't expecting that. I guess somebody else has been making the mistake of thinking."

"Bell?"

"Nope. That columnist, Ray Martin. Kelly says it looks like suicide, but that would be too convenient."

CHAPTER TWELVE

A CONFESSION

A RED-FACED plainclothesman opened the front door and greeted Jason Jones with friendly cursing. He, it turned out, was Sergeant Kelly.

"Necessary Smith?" Sergeant Kelly said when Jason introduced them. "Where the hell did you get a name like that?"

Necessary explained, quickly and good-naturedly.

"You're a good one to be working with Jason," was his comment when Necessary finished. "I always thought Jason held the all-time record for being screwball, but I guess you run him a close second."

"Sergeant Kelly," Jason said, "is a man without any eccentricities — and therefore without charm. Where is the late columnist?"

"Right where he dropped," Kelly said. "Doc Forrest is just finishing looking him over. It's suicide all right, but I thought you'd like to take a look at him. There won't be any argument then. But it looks like this is one time you're a little late."

"What makes you so sure it's suicide?" Jason asked.

"Because if it isn't, the murderer had to crawl through the crack under the door," Kelly retorted. "You'll see."

Necessary and Jason followed him inside and down the hall to the back.

"Where is everybody?" Necessary asked.

"In the living room," Kelly said, jerking his thumb towards the door. "Snell's keeping an eye on them, only there ain't much reason for it."

He led them to the back where, opposite the kitchen, there was a small lavatory. A cop stood by the open door. As they approached, a little grey-haired man backed out of the lavatory. He smiled as he saw them approaching.

"Hello, Jones," he called. "How are you? I haven't seen you since that juicy murder of a strip queen. I had to look up the report on that just the other day. You did a nice job."

"Yeah, it worked out all right, Doc," Jason said. "How's the wife? Did she make any jelly from the recipe I gave you?"

"She certainly did. We're all crazy about it. Have to keep the kids from over-eating whenever she puts it on the table."

"I told you he was nuts," Sergeant Kelly muttered to Necessary. "Doc ain't much better. Talking about jelly while they're practically on top of a corpse."

"I forgot to tell you, Smith," Jason said with a chuckle, "that Kelly goes off his feed for days every time we have a murder case."

"Can I help it if I got a delicate stomach?" growled Kelly.

"Come over to my office and I'll fix you up, Kelly," the Medical Examiner said.

"Nothing doing! The last time I bit on that you gave me something that had me spittin' blue for a week. Scared the daylights out of my wife."

"What about this fellow, Doc?" Jason asked, nodding his head towards the lavatory.

"Shot through the brain with a .22," Doc said cheerfully. "The gun was held against his head. Burned part of the hair off. Could have been suicide."

"What do you mean *could?*" Jason asked. "Kelly swears it was."

"That's his department. From my angle, anybody could have shot him. You want me for anything else?"

"I guess not."

"I'll get the report over to you in the morning. Give my regards to your wife, Jones."

The Medical Examiner nodded to the two men from his office and left. The two men started taking the body out of the lavatory. While they were doing it, Jason stepped over to another plainclothesman and said something to him in a low tone. The detective nodded and when the morgue men departed with their basket, he followed.

Necessary got only a brief glimpse of Ray Martin's body as it was carried out. It was enough to see the red-crusted hole just back of his temple.

"You do that, Kelly?" Jason asked, coming back to them. He was pointing at the lavatory door. One panel had a hole broken through it.

"Sure," Kelly said. "That's what I mean by saying it was suicide. The

door was locked on the inside and the only way we could get in was to break it."

"Never heard of doors being locked by gadgets?" Jason asked quietly.

"Sure I've heard of it," Kelly answered, his face red. "But I've never heard of it any place except in a detective story. Besides, if you'll take a look you'll see that this door ain't got any keyhole and there ain't enough space at top or bottom to sneak a pin through. The door locked with a catch on the inside and I'd like to see you do that with a gadget."

"Suppose you start at the beginning," Jason said.

"Okay," Kelly said. "Patterson called in. He was one of the men that was here watching the house. He said that this Bell guy had just come out and told him that this columnist had come into his house and vanished. Patterson had seen the guy come in so he knew that part of it was true. He and Snell came back in the house with Bell and they searched the whole house. Finally they've looked in every room in the house except this one downstairs lavatory which is locked. Snell had already checked with the men in the back of the house and the guy hadn't gone out that way. Then they check on everybody in the house. Everybody is accounted for, so they figure that this guy must be in the lavatory. They pound on the door, but there's no answer.

"Bell says that maybe the guy has bumped himself off in there and that they should call Headquarters. Snell called in. I didn't want to bother you unless there was something wrong, so I ran out. We had to break the door down, as you can see, and we found the guy doubled up on the floor with the bullet through his head and this small .22 beside him. He must have been standing over the sink when he did it because there was some blood in the bowl. The guy was still warm."

Jason glanced at the tiny automatic which Kelly was holding with a handkerchief wrapped around the barrel.

"Fingerprints?" he asked idly.

"Yeah. They haven't been taken yet but they look like his."

"Window in the lavatory?" Jason asked, sticking his head through the door. Necessary looked over his shoulder. The lavatory was small, no more than three feet square, with only the commode, a washbowl and a mirror in it. There was a small, frosted window, secured by a latch.

"You can see it's fastened," Kelly said. "I'm telling you, Jason, a fly couldn't get in that room without the door opening for him. But that ain't all."

"You've been holding out on me — like some other people," Jason accused.

"I was just saving it till last," Kelly said. He unfolded a newspaper that he had been carrying and held it up so Jason could see it. It was a copy of one of the late afternoon papers and was just an ordinary paper except that eight words in the headlines had been underlined with a blue pencil.

"I AM GUILTY," SAYS KANE

"THIS IS THE BEST WAY," SAYS WIFE KILLER AS JUDGE PASSES SENTENCE

"You see," Kelly says, "he outlined them words just before he bumped himself off. So I guess he was your murderer and he figured you were getting too close to him."

"Did you find the pencil?" Jason asked.

"Sure. It was in his vest pocket. The same pencil all right."

"Very considerate of him," Jason murmured. "What do you think, Smith?"

"I think it smells," Necessary said promptly. "It's too pat."

"I think," Jason said carefully, "that you're on the trail of something. Definitely. But it sort of plays hob with that nice theory of yours, doesn't it?"

"It might," Necessary admitted, "although it doesn't have to."

"You mean you think this guy was murdered too?" Sergeant Kelly cried.

"That's right," Jason said.

"You're nuts! Just tell me how the murderer got in and out of that room. Just tell me that!"

"I don't know," Jason admitted quite cheerfully. "Do you, Smith?"

"Maybe he took the door off the hinges," Necessary suggested.

"Like hell," muttered Kelly. "Look at them hinges."

They weren't exactly rusty, but it was plain that the screws in the hinges hadn't been removed.

"I don't think it's necessary to know how it was done," Jason said. "It is necessary to know how the first murder was committed, but not this one."

"Then, what makes you so sure he was murdered?"

"Just a hunch, Kelly," Jason said. "You wouldn't like to make a little bet on it, would you?"

"No, but I don't get it."

"It's too convenient," Jason said. "Now I've seen murderers who would

commit suicide, but they were the flighty kind who just butchered somebody with the nearest knife. You take a murderer who goes to all the trouble this one did with that first murder and he won't just suddenly shoot himself because a cop asks a couple of questions. Besides, Ray Martin was a columnist. If he'd wanted suddenly to give himself up, his confession would have been in his column and he wouldn't have committed suicide until it had gone to press. No columnist would pass up a scoop like that."

"Is that all you've got to go on?" Kelly said scornfully.

"We'll have more shortly," Jason said. "You don't think he'd come all the way out here to commit suicide, do you? Kelly, if you dare recite that old bromide about murderers returning to the scene of their crime, I'll walk right out on this case and go home to look at my geraniums."

Necessary suddenly laughed. It was not an ordinary laugh, more like a roar. His thin face was almost split by the distortion of his mouth.

"That's a disgusting sound, if I ever heard one," Jason said, looking at Necessary with suspicion. "What brought on this fit?"

"Maybe he's ripe for the booby bin," Kelly said. "If you ask me, any guy that changes his name to Necessary ain't far from it anyway."

"I just remembered," Necessary said, still laughing, yet managing somehow to glare at Sergeant Kelly at the same time, "that you said not long ago that if you had to contend with a locked room in this case, you'd hand in your resignation."

"I might at that," Jason said indignantly.

"Hey," Kelly said with alarm, "don't you talk like that to Jason or you're liable to find Captain Haig climbing all over you. He spends half his time talking Jason out of retiring, so don't you start wrecking the machinery!"

"In fact," Jason said as though he hadn't heard Kelly, "I think maybe I will. If I quit now, I could still get home in time for dinner. Helen said she'd have blueberry pie for dinner tonight and —"

"Now, Jason," Sergeant Kelly said, "you can't do that. You know the Commissioner has been sore at the captain anyway and this'd be just about enough to make him put the axe to the captain. Especially with this newspaper guy getting killed. It ain't like just anybody was knocked off. Besides, the captain's going to blame me if you walk out."

"I don't know why I should give up all my fun just to please the Homicide Bureau," Jason grumbled.

"You know you wouldn't be happy if you didn't have no murders to

solve," Kelly said. "You'd get tired of doing nothing but raising geraniums. That's a hobby, that ain't no full time job. Anyway, you can't quit like this right in the middle!"

"I suppose I'll have to stay just so the rest of you won't get fired," Jason said. "I'm too easy-going. That's the trouble."

Sergeant Kelly breathed a sigh of relief and glared at Necessary Smith.

"Don't you ever do that again," he said, "or I'll frame you and run you in myself."

"Did you say something about somebody being nuts?" Necessary asked with a grin. He had watched Jason during the exchange between them and his guess was that Jason had been enjoying the whole thing immensely.

The door to the living room opened and another plainclothes cop stuck his head out.

"Phone for you, Jason," he called.

"There's an extension back here," Jason said. "I'll take it there."

He waddled up the hall to the small study where he and Necessary had talked the night before. He closed the door behind him so that the men in the hall couldn't hear him.

In a couple of minutes he was out.

"There goes your suicide," he said to Kelly.

"What do you mean?"

"I told one of your men to go along with the body," Jason said, "and to make the paraffin test as soon as they arrived at the morgue. He just called."

"And?"

"The test showed that Martin hadn't fired a gun. You going to try to tell me that Martin shot the gun with his toe?"

"I'll be damned," Kelly said. "You sure?"

"When did the paraffin test fail on a negative test?" Jason said.

"Yeah, I know. . . . But how the hell'd the murderer get in and out?"

"You might try answering that," Necessary suggested.

"Why should I?" Jason demanded. "It's too much work. This murder shows that the murderer is getting nervous, so he probably made a mistake. It's a lot of foolishness to worry about how a door was locked. That's probably what the murderer wants us to do. How come Bell didn't know where Martin was?"

"He told Patterson," said Kelly, "that he didn't know that Martin was there until just a moment before. Seems one of the maids let Martin in and

he told her not to announce him; that he'd just wait downstairs until somebody showed up. Everybody was upstairs then. One of the maids was upstairs and the one that let Martin in had some work to do down in the basement. Bell came downstairs after a while, according to him, and met this maid coming up from the basement. She asked him if he'd seen Martin. He hadn't, so he looked around and then came out and got hold of Patterson."

"Uh-huh," Jason said. "I guess maybe we better go in the living room and sort of see what they have to say."

"If you're just waiting for the murderer to make a mistake," Necessary said slyly, "why bother to ask them a lot of questions?"

"Might make the murderer more nervous," Jason said. "You know, I think I'm going to regret taking you under my wing. You're going to make trouble for me. You still got that idea in your head that Duncan wanted to kill Bell?"

"I guess maybe that was wrong," Necessary admitted. "But it fitted into the facts. I haven't completely discarded it, but I've filed it for the time."

"You just learn to file more things that way and you'll maybe get to be a good detective some day."

"He's got the nose for it," Kelly suggested.

"Any more cracks out of you," Necessary said, "and I'll take one at you."

"Sensitive," Jason said. "Wasn't there some other fellow who was always getting into fights if anybody even looked at his nose? There was a play, or something."

"Cyrano de Bergerac," Necessary said sourly. If the truth was known, Necessary really didn't object to being kidded about the size of his nose, but it gave him a good excuse to be belligerent occasionally.

"Speaking of plays and plots," Jason said, "we got another one of those situations that sounds like it was sort of plotted by a writer. Maybe — but let's go in. You're going to ask the questions, Smith."

"Why?"

"Maybe because you're so good at it," Jason said mildly, "and maybe because I feel like resting. This has been a hard day for me. I ain't used to it."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NECESSARY GETS AN IDEA

BARRING the absence of Ray Martin, the set-up of the Bell living room was very much the same as it had been the night before when they had entered. The plainclothes cop was leaning against the wall beside the door, looking annoyed. Bennett Barlay and George Porter sat on the couch. Barlay looked harassed and Porter was gazing uncomfortably at the ceiling.

The three women sat at one end of the room. Betty Bell kept gazing at her husband, with occasional glances towards Karen Russell. Her face was calm and gave no intimation of her thoughts.

Karen Russell was pale, but not as pale as she had been the night before. She wore a black and white frock, draped to accent her figure, and a single strand of pearls was her only jewelry. It was difficult to guess whether she had worn the more somber dress out of respect for the dead or because it heightened her pallor and set off the golden sheen of her hair.

There was little doubt that June Hayes wore a plain black frock because of Manny Ladd. In a way, she probably felt herself a widow. Her face was wan and she looked as if she had not slept the night before.

Willard Duncan sat in one of the chairs in the other corner of the room. There were worried lines around his eyes, as he kept glancing at Johnny Bell. He too looked as if he hadn't slept so well the night before.

Gregor Fain sat near him and there was an insolent grin on his face as he saw Jason Jones and Necessary Smith enter.

Johnny Bell paced up and down the floor with a suggestion of savagery in his movements. He stopped as the door opened and anger flooded his face.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demanded, looking at Necessary. "I hire a private detective and he immediately takes a holiday — on my dough. You've got a lot of nerve to call yourself a detective!"

"He's been driving me nuts, Jason," Snell said. "So help me, if you hadn't come I think I'd have taken a poke at him."

"Come on," Johnny said to Smith. "Let's hear your excuses."

"I —" Necessary began angrily.

"Now, now," Jason said. "I don't care if you did hire Smith. He's been busy with me, and we'll ask the questions."

He said it quietly, and in his usual sleepy manner, but there was a hint of authority in his voice. But it failed to impress Johnny Bell. He merely transferred his anger from Necessary to Jason.

"You're a hell of a detective too," he snapped. "My house is being cluttered up with dumb flatfeet. And I've got to try and create with this mass of stupidity around me! It's enough to drive a guy nuts! If you weren't so dumb, you would have caught the murderer and we wouldn't have had this suicide here too. Although why the louse had to pick my house to do it in, I don't know."

"You think it was suicide?" Jason asked.

"Of course! Any fool could see that. Don't tell me you're going to try to make a mystery out of it!"

"What makes you think so?"

"If the note wasn't enough," Johnny said, "the fact that the guy was locked in with his gun ought to be enough. Nobody would go to that much trouble to kill him. Or maybe you think somebody came up through the plumbing and shot him through the head!"

"Somebody went to a lot of trouble to kill Manny Ladd last night," Jason pointed out.

"That's different. Anyway, I've been thinking. That just fitted in with Martin. He probably did it that way just so he'd have better material for his column."

"Did you ever hear of the paraffin test?" Jason asked calmly.

"Sure. What about it?"

"The test was made on Martin's hands and showed that he hadn't fired a gun."

It took more than that to stop Johnny Bell.

"Well, that's more proof that you're a bunch of duds. You're going to keep on lousing this up until I won't get any work done at all."

"Did you do any today?"

"Part of a scene. But it's a wonder the way June was sniffling around. You'd think, for heaven's sake, she never knew that people died. I should have done twice as much as I did. If you cops don't shake your tails, I'm going to call the Commissioner. I'm an important guy and you can't shove me around."

Necessary Smith and Detective Snell were both itching to try it, but Jason's calm was unshakable.

"Can't," he said. "The Commissioner's fishing." He turned to look at Gregor Fain. "Thought you had to work?"

"I did work," Fain said, "after I got the cops combed out of my hair. I just came over a little while ago. You wouldn't want me to miss the fun, would you, Jonesy?"

"Nope," Jason said. He looked back at Bell. "Why did you hire Smith yesterday?"

"I'm beginning to wonder myself," Johnny retorted.

"Why?" Jason persisted.

"Because somebody was trying to pull a fast one on me and I wanted to get the goods on him."

"What was this fast one?"

"That is none of your business," Johnny said.

"Was Manny Ladd maybe the one you thought was doing this?"

"Maybe."

"Why'd you hire Smith to work on the murder then?"

"Because I knew you Homicide cops were dumb," Johnny snarled. "Because I was curious, and it's my dough."

"The curious heel," Snell muttered so low that only Necessary heard him.

Jason Jones nodded to himself and crossed the room to an easy chair. He dropped into it and lit a cigarette.

"You ask them some questions, Smith," he said and closed his eyes.

"On my dough he works for the city!" Johnny Bell said.

"Where's the maid who let Ray Martin in?" Necessary asked, ignoring Johnny.

"I'll get her," Betty Bell said quietly. She got up and stepped into the other room. She was back in a minute with a white-uniformed girl.

"This is Claudette," she said. "She let him in."

The girl stared back at Necessary. Excitement had reddened her cheeks, but her manner was self-contained.

"Do you know what time it was when you let Mr. Martin in?" Necessary asked.

"I think about four o'clock," the girl answered. There was only a slight trace of accent in her speech. "I didn't look, but it was about that."

"You showed him in here?"

"Yes sir."

"Did he ask to see anyone in particular?"

"No sir. He just asked if everyone was home and I said yes. I asked him if he wanted me to call Mr. Bell and he said he'd just wait until somebody came down."

"How did Mr. Martin act? That is, did he act frightened or excited?"

"He did act a little excited, I guess."

"You went right down to the basement after that?"

"Yes sir."

"Are you sure that no one else was downstairs at the time?"

"I didn't see anyone."

"Who was the last person you saw downstairs before Mr. Martin arrived?"

"Mr. Bell."

"And he was the first person you saw on coming up from the basement later?"

"What the hell are you trying to do?" demanded Johnny Bell. "If you're trying to throw suspicion on me, you'll get tossed out damn quick."

"Could I maybe make him keep quiet, Jason?" Snell asked eagerly.

Jason shook his head.

"I'm only trying to get the facts," Necessary said to Johnny. "Your turn will come later." The more he saw and heard of Johnny Bell, the less he liked him.

"You told Mr. Bell about Mr. Martin arriving?" he asked the girl.

"Yes sir."

"Did you help look for Mr. Martin?"

"After Mr. Bell said he wasn't in here, yes."

"You didn't hear anything unusual while you were in the basement?"

"No sir."

"Nothing like a gun shot?"

"No sir."

"That'll be all, I guess," Necessary said.

The maid hesitated and looked at her mistress.

"You may go," Betty Bell said.

After the girl left, Necessary tapped his nose thoughtfully, trying to decide whom to question next. Jason looked as if he were asleep. Necessary decided to take the three women first. An idea was slowly brewing in the back of his head.

"Where were you at about four o'clock, Mrs. Bell?" he asked.

"In my room," Betty Bell said. "I was there from two o'clock until about four-thirty when Johnny knocked at my door and asked if I had seen Ray Martin. I joined the search then."

"Were you alone?"

"No. The other maid was with me."

"The other maid was with you all the time?"

"Yes."

"You didn't know that Martin was here until your husband knocked at your door?"

"No."

"Did you hear anything like a shot?"

"No."

"Where were you, Miss Russell?"

"In my room," she answered.

"I thought you weren't staying here."

"I'm not," she said, "but I have stayed over two or three times since we started working on the play. Johnny and Betty have kept a room for me. I came over this afternoon and was in my room going over the first two scenes of the play. I'm trying to learn it as we go along and it helped to keep my mind off — what happened last night." She shuddered.

"Do you have to badger people this way?" demanded Johnny. "You're beginning to annoy me. This way, I'll get completely out of the mood for writing."

"You seem to be more worried about your play than about the fact that two people have been killed," Necessary said.

"Why not?" Johnny retorted. "People die all the time, but what's that got to do with me! I've got a following and I have to keep turning the stuff out."

"Johnny really isn't as hard-hearted as he seems," Willard Duncan said. "He's just a little temperamental."

"Temperamental, hell!" Johnny said. "If they don't like it, they can get to hell out."

"You'd probably be tickled if the whole thing was dropped," Necessary said sarcastically. "Now, Miss Russell, you were in your room from, say, four to four-thirty?"

"Oh, much longer."

"Alone?"

"Naturally."

"You didn't hear a shot?"

"No."

"Miss Hayes," Necessary said, turning to the small blonde, "were you working?"

"No," she said. "I worked until a little after two. Then I had such a sick headache I went to my room to lie down. I was there until the officers started searching the house, whatever time that was."

"You were alone?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear a shot?"

"No."

"You left Bell alone in his study?"

"Yes. He said that he'd go ahead with the plotting."

Necessary nodded and turned to face the couch.

"You were also upstairs, Mr. Porter?" he asked.

The portly millionaire nodded.

"I went out for a short walk during the afternoon," he said. "I returned at about a quarter to four, I believe. Perhaps one of your men can verify that. I noticed he was following me. Johnny was also in here, looking through a book. He seemed busy, so I went directly to my room and took a shower. I believe I was there until about four-thirty."

"Did you hear a shot?"

"No."

"Do you own a gun, Mr. Porter?"

"I own several of them, but they are all at my home in Westchester. I, naturally, didn't bring any of them here with me."

"He wasn't expecting any open season," Detective Snell offered, but nobody paid any attention to him.

"Mr. Barlay?" Necessary said.

"I was back here by three," Bennett Barlay said. "I was in my room until the detectives came."

"This locked room wasn't in your plot, was it?" Necessary asked.

"N-no," Barlay said with a glance at Bell. But Johnny was staring moodily out of the window and evidently didn't hear.

"You were in your room alone from three until about four-thirty then?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear the shot?"

"No."

"Do you own a gun?"

"No."

"How about you, Mr. Duncan?" Necessary asked, facing the bald-headed agent.

"You mean around four?" Duncan asked.

"Say, from four or a little before to around four-thirty."

"I went into the bathroom to shave," Duncan said slowly. "I'm not exactly sure of the time but it must have been about four. Johnny was just coming upstairs at the time and I stopped long enough to ask him how the play was coming. I should say I was in the bathroom fifteen or twenty minutes. Then I went to my room."

"The bathroom's near the stairs?" Necessary asked.

"Yes. It's beside my room at the front of the house."

"Where's Bell's study in relation to that?"

"Just past the head of the stairs. Towards the back."

"Did you hear a shot?"

"No."

"Do you own a gun?"

"No."

"What time did you get here, Mr. Fain?"

"Three-thirty," the mystery writer answered. "So you've got a locked room on your hands. Was it the old pin and string gag?"

"What do you know about locked rooms?" Jason Jones asked, opening his eyes.

"So you weren't asleep, Jonesy," Gregor Fain said. "I was wondering how to tell. I know all about locked rooms. Would you like a lecture?"

"No, thanks," Jason said. "I can still remember, with faint shudders, the lecture on locked rooms you had in one of your books. I think we can eliminate pins and strings and your fancy theories on trap doors."

"Will you walk into my trap door," Gregor Fain said with a grin.

"Very funny," Necessary said, while Jason closed his eyes, a look of pain on his face. "Did you see anyone when you came in?"

"Only the maid."

"Where'd you go?"

"Upstairs." Fain looked as if he was enjoying the joke of everybody having been upstairs. "Why should I be different?"

"Whereabouts upstairs?"

"There's a second living room up there, the other side of Johnny's study. I was in it."

"All the time?"

"Till Johnny started looking for the lost columnist."

"What were you doing there all the time?"

"Reading."

"But, Gregor," Betty Bell exclaimed, "there aren't any books in that room except the ones you wrote!"

"I know it," Gregor Fain said. "What's wrong with me reading my own book? I enjoyed it. After all, I am *the* big name in the mystery field."

"Maybe the guy's wacky," Snell suggested.

Jason's eyes were open again.

"You were in this upstairs sitting room all the time?" he asked.

"That's right. I read the book through."

"Was the door open or closed?"

"About half closed," Fain answered.

"Did you hear Ray Martin arrive?"

"Yeah. I heard him talking to the maid."

"You could understand what he was saying?"

"Most of it. Why?"

But Jason had gone back into his torpor.

"You heard him arrive and you didn't come down?" Necessary asked.

"Why should I? He didn't want to see me — and I was enjoying myself." His face was again wreathed in that fatuous grin that was getting on Necessary's nerves.

The maid appeared in the door. She was holding a small screwdriver in her hand.

"Mrs. Bell . . ." she said hesitatingly.

"What is it, Claudette?"

"Here's that screwdriver Mr. Bell was asking for this morning. I just found it in the kitchen but I don't know how it got there."

"You took it," Johnny Bell accused. "You went into my study and took it for some reason. How many times do I have to tell you to stay out of that

study? I don't —"

"Claudette wouldn't do anything of the kind," Betty Bell interrupted. "Stop being silly. Put it down, Claudette, and go back to your work."

Necessary Smith cursed to himself as the girl obeyed. He knew that the screwdriver probably had something to do with the locked room, but it would be useless as evidence. The maid had been twisting it in her hands as she entered, so if there had been any fingerprints they would be obliterated now. He turned back to Gregor Fain.

"If you could hear Martin talking to the maid," he said, "you probably also heard the shot?"

"I think I did," Fain admitted, "although I didn't know that's what it was at the time. I was reading and didn't pay much attention, but I heard a noise, a few minutes after Martin arrived, that could have been a small caliber gun."

"Could you see the stairs from where you sat?"

"No."

"But you could see the hall?"

"Part of it."

"Did you notice anyone go past the door while you were in the room?"

"No."

"Mrs. Bell," Necessary said, looking at her, "will you locate all the upstairs rooms for me, in their relationship to the living room where Fain sat?"

"My room and June's are just past it, on the same side," she said. "Opposite our rooms are two guest rooms, one of which was being used by Miss Russell. There is another bedroom directly across from the living room, which is the one Manny had. Johnny's study is next to the living room, on this side, with a connecting door to his room. Mr. Porter has the room across from the study, Bennett has the room next to that and Willard the last room on the same side. There is also a storage room next to Johnny's bedroom."

"Then only you, Miss Russell and Miss Hayes would have had to go past the living room to come downstairs?"

"Yes."

"How many rooms are there downstairs?" Necessary asked.

"Eight, not counting the basement."

"I know the maid said everyone was upstairs, but couldn't someone have been in one of the rooms without her knowing it?"

"I suppose so, but it seems a little unlikely. You see we also employ a woman who does nothing but clean, but she's been off the last three days and the maids have had to do her work too. Claudette had just finished going over the rooms down here when Mr. Martin rang."

"Did you know that Martin was coming?"

"I didn't know," Betty Bell said. She looked at her husband. "He called and talked to Johnny earlier but I don't know what he wanted."

"What did he want?" Necessary asked, swinging towards Johnny Bell.

"Nothing. Just said he might be over later."

"That's all?"

"That's all he said," Johnny snapped. "I supposed that he wanted something about my play to use in his column."

"Did he say what time he was coming?"

"No."

"Did you tell anyone else that he was coming?"

"No."

"Where were you between four and four-thirty?" Necessary asked him.

"So you take five hundred bucks of my dough and then waste a lot of my time with damn fool questions!" Johnny said.

"Got secrets, have you?" Jason asked, opening one eye.

"Hell, no," Johnny snapped. "But if you think you're going to solve this case just by asking a lot of questions, you're nuts!"

"Maybe we will," Necessary said softly. "Where were you?"

"In my room. What makes you so sure it was somebody in this house? If there wasn't anyone downstairs, somebody might have come in from the outside. Maybe somebody followed him here."

There was a sharp exclamation from the detective beside Necessary.

"I forgot to tell you what Philips said," he said to Jason.

"Philips?" Necessary asked.

"One of the men posted in the back," Jason said. "What about Philips, Snell?"

"He said that about four he saw some guy hanging around and watching this house. Philips started to find out who the guy was, but he disappeared."

"You see!" exclaimed Johnny Bell. "Dumb cops!"

"What kind of a guy?" Jason asked.

"Philips said he was a big blond fellow, built like a prize fighter. That's about all he told me."

Necessary was conscious of Johnny Bell and Karen Russell exchanging glances. But it was Gregor Fain who spoke.

"Remember my telling you to look into this guy Searles," he said. "That sounds like him."

"Kim wouldn't —" Karen Russell broke off and looked frightened.

"Maybe we better get Philips in here and have him give us the story," Necessary suggested to Jason.

Jason waved a pudgy hand.

"Plenty of time," he said. "He'll have it all on his report. Philips still remembers how many pickets there were in a fence he passed six years ago and probably put it in a report at the time."

"Okay," Necessary said. "I don't think it means anything myself. It would be pretty tough to sneak into the house in daylight when it's watched front and back."

"Not if all the cops are like you two," Johnny Bell said.

"Don't upset him like that," Jason said, eyeing Necessary shrewdly. "He's about to incubate an idea. I can see it bubbling up in him. Right, son?"

"Maybe," Necessary admitted.

Jason nodded.

"I knew it," he said happily. "When you didn't snap at that blond herring, I knew something was bouncing around inside your head."

"I thought that pained look was natural with him," Gregor Fain said.

"Go ahead son," Jason said, relaxing once more in his chair.

"I still want to ask a few questions," Necessary said. "Bell, the maid said you were downstairs at a quarter to four. What about it?"

"No law against it, is there? It's my house. I was looking up something in a book and I was back in my room at five minutes to four. Willard told you he saw me coming upstairs."

"Yeah," Necessary said. "You were in your room from then until what time?"

"Four-thirty, when I went to the kitchen for a glass of milk and met the maid."

"You had just come downstairs then?"

"Yes."

"You were in your room alone?"

"Yes, and it's practically the only time I'm alone. The rest of the time

I'm combing flatfeet out of my hair and giving my money away to simple private detectives."

"That screwdriver the maid brought in," Necessary said, with restraint, pointing to it. "When did you miss it?"

"This morning."

"It was always in your room?"

"Yes."

"What did you want it for this morning?"

"I don't remember now," Johnny said. "Want to make something of it?"

"Maybe I do," Necessary answered curtly. "You make a lot of money from your writing, don't you?"

"More than you'll ever make."

"You'd hate to lose it, wouldn't you?"

"Is that the sixty-four dollar question?" jeered Johnny.

"Miss Hayes," Necessary said, "you told me that you stopped work at about two o'clock and went to your room to lie down because you had a sick headache. Did you ask Bell if you could stop work?"

"No," she answered.

"Bell suggested that you stop work?"

"Yes."

"That's what I thought," Necessary said triumphantly. "I'm ready to clear up the case for you now, Jason."

"I'm listening," Jason said. "Stop trying to act mysterious and go ahead."

There was little doubt in the mind of anyone there whom Necessary was considering as the murderer. They were either staring openly at Johnny Bell or making a point of not looking at him. The thought had also penetrated Bell's steel-plating of ego. He had stopped pacing up and down and was staring at Necessary. His face was almost the color of the maroon scarf around his neck. His attitude was that of a pouter pigeon who had discovered his dinner was being threatened.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TOO MANY CONFESSIONS

JOHNNY BELL started pacing the floor again. Even in his anger there was something studied in the way he paced. It was the walk of a big shot — of a Hollywood producer having trouble with his writers who are dumb enough to tell him he can't make a light musical comedy out of Hamlet. It was the strut of a Napoleon — a Hollywood Boulevard Napoleon — trying to remember he had to be patient with the common herd.

"That's gratitude," Johnny said. "I give the guy five hundred bucks and he wants to pin something on me. Smith, you're a bum and a louse!"

"You mean Necessary isn't necessary," Gregor Fain said with a grin.

"A lousy bum," repeated Johnny Bell. "The kind of guy who knifes you in the back!"

"Shut up!" Necessary Smith suddenly roared. His face was flushed with anger. "A hell of a right you have to talk about gratitude! You're about the worst heel I've ever heard about and I don't want your five hundred dollars. You can have it to play with while you're cooking in the electric chair! I—" He was fishing in his pocket for the money when Jason interrupted.

"Now, now," Jason said. "Don't be hasty, Smith. Five hundred dollars is a lot of money. You'd be surprised how many geraniums that would buy. You just keep that five hundred dollars in your pocket. You're still employed by Bell. Of course, maybe he doesn't want to answer any more questions . . ."

"I'll answer all the questions you want to ask," Johnny snapped. He dropped into a chair and stared at Necessary with hate in his eyes. "What difference does it make now? My mood is gone anyway. To hell with the play. To hell with everything."

"I don't want to ask very many more questions," Necessary said. "Bell, the person you thought was pulling a fast one on you when you first called me yesterday morning was Manny Ladd, wasn't it?"

"I thought maybe he was. So what?"

"The fast one he was going to pull was that he was going to give out some

stories about you that might have ruined you, wasn't it?"

"He was making up a lot of stuff because he wanted to ruin me," Johnny Bell said. "He thought maybe if he could ruin me that he'd have a chance with Betty. But he was making all the stuff up."

"What did you want me to do?"

"I wanted you to get something on him and my wife so I could make him tear the stuff up."

"Johnny!" Betty Bell said. "You know there wasn't anything between Manny and me!"

"Sure, I know you're one of those sentimental fools," Johnny said, "just like he was. So it wouldn't have been hard to frame enough so he'd shut up to protect you."

Betty Bell said nothing, but the hurt was plain as she caught her lower lip between her teeth.

"How'd you find out what he was doing?" Necessary asked.

"I overheard him talking to Ray Martin about it. From what he said he was going to frame some kind of proof too and Martin was going to print it. Manny was just enough of a rat to do something like that."

"You hated Manny Ladd for that?"

"What would you expect me to do — love him like a brother?"

"And you hated Ray Martin too?"

"No," Johnny said. "All columnists are rats. He would have printed anything that would build his column. If he didn't have the framed-up stuff Manny wanted to give him, he'd print good stuff about me."

"But you killed Manny Ladd."

"Like hell I did," Johnny snapped. "Somebody else saved me the trouble."

"I still say you did," Necessary said. "You stole the plot of your play from a pulp magazine story that Bennett Barlay wrote, but you were the only one who knew just how much of it was going to be used. You were the only one who knew in which scene that shooting was going to take place. You were the only one who knew about the gun and had access to it. You were the one who put the real bullet into it. That explains why the bullet was put in the empty chamber under the hammer. That was one thing that worried us all the time; why the bullet wasn't put in one of the other chambers. We made that mistake because we thought you were supposed to be the victim. Instead, you were the murderer and you planned that grandstand stunt of putting the gun to your head and pulling the trigger. That's

why you put the bullet in the empty chamber. If Duncan hadn't given you the chance to demonstrate the gun was 'empty,' you'd have found some other way."

Necessary glanced at Jason and then continued.

"That's also why you insisted on using the gun even when the others objected. You knew you'd never get another chance like that. And you thought everything would look like Manny Ladd had planned on killing you and then was caught in his own trap. You even tried to sell us that piece of goods last night.

"Manny Ladd was going to show you up. He'd been threatening to for a long time and had been secretively gathering the proof that would do it. I don't know what it was, but it probably had something to do with your women and the writers you've gyped. You knew it would ruin you. You saw all of your money and fame slipping away from you. You wouldn't be able to make a big splash any more, or get dates with girls because they thought you could do something for them in Hollywood or on Broadway. You saw your finish staring you in the face and there was only one way out — to kill Manny Ladd. Jason mentioned that this whole thing looked like a fiction plot, and that was the way you plotted it. You would be the injured party and Manny Ladd would be the villain, caught in his own trap. You were well pleased with yourself, weren't you?

"Then you got a shock. Ray Martin called up and said he was coming over to see you. He evidently hinted that he knew you were the murderer of Manny Ladd. I expect he had a little blackmail in mind. He told us that if he had any ideas on the case, we could read them in his column. He probably was going to tell you that you had to play ball or read about your crime in his column.

"But as soon as he called you knew you'd have to get rid of him too. Already you were plotting, but again it was fiction plotting. You were thinking about your locked room. Maybe you got the idea from your friend Fain, or from one of his books, since he pretends to specialize in locked rooms. You started to cover up by saying that the screwdriver was missing from your room. It wasn't but you wanted everybody to think it was, so that you wouldn't be connected with it. You told Miss Hayes to go to her room and lie down. That in itself was a giveaway. I doubt if anybody ever heard of you doing a kind thing in your life but here you are suddenly worrying about your secretary's health. Completely phony!"

Jason still looked asleep but Necessary noticed that his eyes were only half closed.

"Then Martin arrived," Necessary went on elatedly. "You waited until the maid had left and you came downstairs with your screwdriver and your gun. It's been mentioned how much you like guns and a .22 automatic is probably just the kind of toy you'd like.

"I don't know exactly how you worked it, but I imagine that you pulled the gun on Martin right away and made him walk into the lavatory. You crowded into it with him, shut the door and shot him, holding the gun close to his head. That gun wouldn't make much noise anyway and with his head muffling part of it and the door closed there wasn't much danger of the shot being heard. Then you took the paper, which you had *already* marked with a blue pencil and put it under him on the floor and put the pencil in his pocket. . . . Snell!"

"Yeah," the plainclothesman said, reluctantly removing his gaze from Bell.

"Did Martin have a newspaper under his arm when he came in here?"

Snell scratched his head and thought a minute.

"No," he said. "I remember now he was swinging both arms so he couldn't have had a paper under one of them, could he?"

"I thought that was the way it was," Necessary said. "You had already marked the newspaper, Bell, in order to save time. After you had put the pencil in Martin's pocket and dropped the gun beside him, you came out and locked the door some way, using that screwdriver. I forgot to mention that you had already wiped your prints off the gun and pressed Martin's hand on it. Next you wiped the handle of the screwdriver and left it in the kitchen.

"If everything went the way you planned, the police would think that Ray Martin had committed suicide when he thought the police were going to get him for murdering Manny Ladd. But if something went wrong, then they'd connect that screwdriver sooner or later with the locked room and you had already established the fact that it had been stolen from your room. You felt that you were safe both ways. And you almost were, if it hadn't been for a number of little things that you completely overlooked."

Necessary stopped and looked from Johnny to Jason.

"Looks like he's got you, Gila Dick," Gregor Fain said.

"You dumb louse!" Johnny Bell said. There was such fury in his voice

that it was a tangible thing. "You cheap crook! You're fired!"

"Now, wait a minute," Jason Jones said. "You didn't answer that long-winded summing up."

"I answered it," Johnny said savagely. "I said he's fired and I want him to get the hell out of my house — fast!"

"But what about the two murders?" Jason asked mildly.

"I'll talk to you after that cheap cop is out," Johnny said. "I've fired him and he's got no right to be in here."

"I'm afraid he has," Jason said. "You see, I'm going to retain him as sort of an advisor. I like private detectives. They save the police a lot of work. Now about them murders . . . Smith was pretty convincing. I got a hunch you might have a little trouble squirming out of that."

"If you're dumb enough to believe him," Johnny snapped, "I haven't anything to say to you either. You can get to hell out along with him. I'm Johnny Bell and I don't have to take that crap from anybody."

Jason sighed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought maybe you'd have some defense. But I guess we got to take you in. Snell, you tell him that stuff we have to say and sort of slip the handcuffs on him."

"Wait," a hoarse voice said. "Johnny didn't kill them. I did."

It was Willard Duncan.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JASON IS NOT IMPRESSED

EVERY EYE in the room turned to focus on the agent.

He had risen from his chair and stood facing Jason Jones. His face and the top of his head were the color of old putty. The network of wrinkles around his eyes seemed to have doubled. In thirty minutes or less, Willard Duncan had aged ten years.

"You know," Jason said, disappointment in his tones, "I was sort of expecting somebody to gallop up and save our Nell, but I was hoping it would be somebody else. You've already been named as the murderer once and I thought it would be nice if we had a new suspect."

"It's not a joking matter," Willard Duncan said. "I tell you that I killed Manny and Martin."

"I heard you," Jason said calmly.

Necessary Smith was bewildered, the fine flower of his triumph nipped in the bud.

"I don't believe it," Betty Bell said impulsively. "Willard has been kind and — and wonderful. I think he's only doing it because he thinks it'll save Johnny!"

"A lot of wonderful people have been murderers," Jason said dryly.

"It's true, Betty," Duncan said, without looking at her.

"That was a fine thing to say," Johnny Bell said, staring at his wife. "You think he did it to save me! What the hell are you trying to do — give them the idea you think I'm guilty? Sticking up for a confessed murderer, instead of your husband? That'll be a fine thing for my reputation, won't it? My agent a murderer!"

To the surprise of everyone, it was Bennett Barlay who answered him. The stepped-on ghost turned and, in the moment of turning, became more of an individual than he had ever been in his life.

"All you think about is that damned reputation of yours, isn't it?" he shouted. He was standing on his feet, looking down at Johnny. "*You're* worrying about a reputation that other people made for you! That's a laugh. There are a hundred people who would scream with laughter at that. But it isn't funny. Why the hell don't you worry a little about human beings once in a while? Then you might have some right to call yourself a writer!"

"Another rat," Johnny said, sneering up into Barlay's face. "That'll finish you too, sonny boy. I'll see to it that you never sell a story as long as you live."

"Nuts!" said Bennett Barlay. "I don't care if I have to dig coal — I'll still be more of a writer than you'll ever be. I've played yes man to you long enough, letting you make money from me and steal my ideas and kick me around, because I thought the money I was getting was important. But it wasn't. I've just learned that. No money in the world can compare with being free of you, of not being corrupted by your foulness. In the last two days I've really looked into your soul — and it sickens me."

"Very pretty talk," Johnny said, still with a sneer on his face, "but see how far it'll get you with the landlord when the first of the month comes around."

"Before we play any more Truth and Consequences," Jason said dryly, "there is another matter more important. Here's a man trying to confess to murder and you won't let him talk."

"I told you I killed them," Willard Duncan said. "What more do you want? Take me away."

"Why?"

"Why?" Duncan repeated blankly.

"Yeah. Why did you kill them? You had a reason, didn't you? Or did you just kill them because a little voice whispered to you?"

Duncan wet his lips.

"Do I have to go all through it?"

Jason nodded.

"Don't you want to take it down?" Duncan asked.

"Nope. If you wanted to change your mind, a confession wouldn't be much good. If you don't want to change your mind, you'll tell us again. In fact, I've known some murderers who wouldn't stop confessing. You just go ahead and tell it your own way."

"Well . . ." Duncan said hesitatingly. He kept gazing down at the floor, refusing to look at the others in the room. "I've been married, you know. Or maybe you don't. My wife and I have been separated for three years now. Just recently we started getting friendly again and I thought — hoped — that she would come back to me. I — I love my wife, Mr. Jones, and I would give anything to have her back. I'm getting old and I miss her.

"I really thought for a while that she was going to come back, but suddenly she changed. Three days ago, she told me that she was leaving town and that she never wanted to see me again. I found out that Manny Ladd was the cause of her changing her mind."

"You mean," Jason asked, "that your wife was in love with Manny Ladd?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. But he had been talking to her. Probably it started accidentally. But he talked her out of coming back to me. He told her that as long as I was Johnny's agent, she could never have a decent life with me — that Johnny owned me body and soul. He said a lot of other things. The upshot was that she changed her mind."

"Where is your wife now?"

"I don't know," Duncan said brokenly. "She left town just as she threatened and I haven't been able to find her. It may sound foolish to you — but

you'll probably never know what that did to me. I kept thinking about Manny doing that to me and then — then I killed him."

"How?" Jason asked.

"The way you guessed," Duncan answered. "I knew that Johnny borrowed the plot from that pulp story — although I think he had forgotten that it was used in the magazine. I knew that the shooting scene was coming next and that Johnny would want to use a gun. I remembered the one he'd brought from California, so I put the shell in it."

"Where'd you get the shell?" interrupted Jason.

"In a store downtown. I put the shell in the empty chamber under the hammer. You see, I knew Johnny very well. Several times when he was playing around with an empty gun and anyone would wonder if it was really empty, he'd pull that trick of putting it to his head and pulling the trigger. I think Betty will remember him doing it. But he never pulled the trigger more than five times, because even when he loaded a gun with blanks he'd leave the chamber under the hammer empty. Anyone familiar with guns would do the same."

"He brought the gun down as I knew he would and I mentioned that it might not be empty. As you know, Johnny acted the way I expected him to and put the gun to his head, pulling the trigger five times. Then he tossed the gun to Miss Russell and she killed Manny. I hated to drag her into it, but it was the only safe way I could think of."

"What about Ray Martin?" Jason asked.

"He guessed it was I. I suppose he knew about my wife some way. Mr. Smith was almost right, only he thought it was Johnny. I overheard Johnny talking to Martin on the phone and knew he was coming out. I knew he didn't particularly like Johnny so I was afraid that he had guessed something."

"I was in the bathroom, as I told you. But you can see out front from the bathroom window and I saw Martin enter the house. I opened the door a little and heard him tell the maid he'd wait. I knew there wasn't anyone else downstairs, so I wiped the lather off my face and went down. My fears were right. He wanted to blackmail me. I don't save any money and I couldn't pay him. There was nothing to do but kill him."

"And the gun?" Jason said.

"I had it in my pocket, just in case. It was an old one that I had. I pulled the gun on him and made him march into the lavatory. Then I killed him."

"What about the newspaper?" Jason asked.

"I had fixed it before, as he guessed. At the same time that I put the gun in my pocket. I had already made up my mind that if he did try to blackmail me, I'd kill him. There's something funny about that. It isn't nearly as hard to kill the second time as it is the first. It's like your second drink, I guess."

"How'd you fix the locked room?" Jason asked.

"I planned that too. I stole the screwdriver from Johnny's room just after Martin called him on the phone. I got the idea from a locked room that was in one of Gregor's books, in which the murderer took a door off at the hinges. That was what I did. After I killed him and put the newspaper under him and dropped the gun on the floor, I took the hinges off the door, locked the door in place and screwed the hinges back in place and left the screwdriver in the kitchen. Then I went back upstairs and finished shaving."

"Can you imagine that!" Johnny Bell exclaimed. "We have a cold-blooded murderer like that with us all the time! He might have gone off his nut at any time and murdered all of us."

"One of my fans!" Gregor Fain said. "At least, I can say I inspired somebody."

"It'll make a great story for you to tell when you get back to Ciro's, won't it, Johnny?" Bennett Barlay said.

"Where'd you get the blue pencil?" Necessary Smith asked Duncan. "It was the kind you'd expect Martin to carry."

"I took it from Johnny's desk," Duncan said apologetically. "He uses them to edit his copy."

"A petty thief too!" Johnny said.

"That's the trouble with murder," Necessary said, looking at Johnny. "It leads to all sorts of things. Why, murderers have been known to stoop to such things as stealing ideas from other people."

"Nuts to you, wise guy," Johnny returned.

"Is that all of it?" Jason asked Duncan.

"That's all. I am ready to take my punishment."

"That's right nice of you," Jason said.

He stood up and stared ruefully down at his vest and his trousers. They were literally coated with cigarette ash.

"Helen's going to give me the devil," Jason remarked. "That's the only thing that makes her mad. I just can't seem to remember . . ." He brushed

at it fruitlessly.

"I guess maybe we better go," he continued. "I'm getting sort of hungry. Snell, you can stay out front until it's time to be relieved. You ready, Smith?"

"Aren't you going to arrest me?" Willard Duncan asked, bewilderment in his voice.

"I," Jason said slowly, "am going to have blueberry pie. Two pieces. Then I am going to look after my geraniums. After that, I may light my pipe and think about the riddle of Man. You wouldn't think to look at me that I was a philosopher of sorts, would you?"

"I don't understand," Duncan faltered.

"Geez, the guy confessed, didn't he?" Snell demanded. "You may be getting soft in the head, Jason?"

Necessary felt almost as bewildered as Snell and Duncan, yet at the same time he was suspicious of Duncan's confession. He didn't like it. Maybe that was the reason he felt suspicious.

"Jonesy is just showing that all policemen have kind hearts as well as big feet," Gregor Fain said.

"Are you serious about not arresting him?" demanded Johnny Bell.

"Never more serious in my life," Jason said. "Did you ever stop to consider that every time an arrest is made it costs the taxpayers money? Not only that, but the taxpayers have to pay for the food the prisoner eats. I am interested in the taxpayer. I want to save him money."

"I'll complain to the Mayor," Johnny threatened.

"I thought you were going to call the Commissioner," Jason said.

"Duncan probably confessed," Gregor Fain said, laughing, "because he knew if you pinned it on Johnny, it would kill him anyway."

"What does that mean?" Jason asked.

"You know Duncan collects ten per cent of everything that Johnny gets. I guess he figured that even ten per cent of the electric chair would kill him."

"Look here," Johnny Bell said angrily. "You can't walk out of here and leave a self-confessed murderer in the house! He's probably a homicidal maniac. He's liable to kill the rest of us."

"I think you'll be safe enough," Jason said, "but I wouldn't guarantee your safety if I'm kept away from my blueberry pie any longer."

"Why aren't you arresting me?" Willard Duncan asked loudly. He was staring at Jason. "I told you I killed them."

"Now, now," Jason said. "You're a taxpayer yourself, Mr. Duncan. You should appreciate the fact that I'm saving you money. Bell, if you feel in danger during the night just stick your head out the window and yell. I wouldn't be surprised if there'd be a policeman around. New York is really very well policed."

"Somebody'll hear about this," Johnny threatened.

"Is it all right if I go home, Mr. Jones?" Bennett Barlay asked. "I don't want to stay around here any longer than I have to."

"Sure. Any of you can go home — as long as home isn't out of New York City. But I'd appreciate it if you were back here about noon tomorrow. Maybe we can have some more confessions."

He waddled out of the room, with Necessary and Snell following him. Willard Duncan still stared towards Jason in a dazed fashion.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHEN A COP'S HUNGRY

THERE WERE a number of questions crowding Necessary's lips, but he waited until they were on the street. Then Snell beat him to it.

"What was the idea of that?" Snell asked.

"No idea," Jason said. "I just wanted to get home and eat my dinner."

"Okay, play hard to get," muttered Snell.

"Look," Necessary said. "You went to the trouble of using the paraffin test on Martin to prove he didn't commit suicide. Why didn't you give it to that bunch in there?"

"The paraffin test is all right for proving that somebody didn't commit murder," Jason said, "but it ain't always so good for proving they did. It might be a little hard to prove that they hadn't stopped in at the arcade for a little target practice. Or that they weren't digging in the garden. No use working the laboratory boys too hard."

"You think that Duncan's confession was a phoney?"

"Uh," grunted Jason.

"Even if he ain't," Snell put in, "you don't know what the guilty guy will do."

"There's enough of you assigned to this house," Jason said, "to follow

anybody that leaves. If somebody tries to leave town, you will arrest him, of course. Otherwise, I think everything is safe enough."

"You still ought to have done something about that guy," Snell insisted. "He confesses to killing two guys and you talk about blueberry pie! . . . I wouldn't mind having a piece myself."

"He'll be safe," Jason said calmly. "That story was completely phony. You can call for me again about ten in the morning, Smith. Good night."

"Say," Necessary said. "What about the morning paper? Remember, Martin said there'd be something in his column?"

"You look it up," Jason said. He was already walking towards the subway. "Don't bother me any more. Don't you forget, Smith, that you're only staying in the case now because I got a soft heart. Good night."

"He is always like that," growled Snell. "When that guy gets hungry, you could murder everybody in New York without him lifting a pinkie. . . . But he usually solves his cases."

"I hope so," Necessary said. "Good night." He went towards his car.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SMITH GOES TO WORK

DESPITE the fact that he didn't have to call for Jason until ten o'clock, Necessary Smith was up early the following morning. As he buttered his English muffin in the restaurant on the corner, he scowled over Ray Martin's column in the *Argus*. He had read it over the night before, but had bought another copy in the morning to be sure that nothing had been added to it.

In the morning edition, Martin's column had been moved up to page two and there was a heavy black border around it. Next to it was a two column editorial. Necessary re-read the column first.

FROM BROADWAY TO
HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD
with
RAY MARTIN

Jason Jones, who is probably better known than any other cop on the Force, is after the murderer of that well-loved press agent, Manny Ladd. The murderer's days are numbered — if Jones can tear himself away from his geraniums long enough to work on it. . . . There'll be more tomorrow about Manny's last employer. . . . A whole column. . . . Today's riddle: When a heel has an Achilles Heel, would you call him double-heeled? . . . Hollywood papers please copy. . . . George Raft arrives in town this P.M. . . .

There was more to the column but nothing that could remotely be connected with the case. It puzzled and annoyed Necessary. Ray Martin had said distinctly that there would be something in his column. But there was certainly nothing there unless it was the promise of a full column on Johnny Bell.

Necessary turned his attention to the editorial. It was headed:

COPS AND GERANIUMS

On this page appears the last column of Ray Martin, long known on Broadway and in Hollywood. But no more will Ray be seen in the 52nd Street bistros. He was murdered last evening between four and four-thirty, in the home of Johnny Bell, well-known author. It was the second murder in that house within twenty-four hours!

Ray left the Argus Building yesterday afternoon at about three-thirty. Before leaving, he turned in the column that appears on this page. But it was not a full column. Ray said that he would phone in the rest of it and he might have a front page story on the murder of press agent Manny Ladd. He must have gotten the story, but the murderer got him before he could phone in. He was shot down in a house completely surrounded by city police!

The Argus is in possession of information, which it believes to be accurate, that a confession of the murders of Manny Ladd and Ray Martin was made last night to First Grade Detective Jason Jones, Homicide, in the presence of another detective and a private detective, named Necessary Smith. *But no arrest was made!*

The Argus wonders if Mayor LaGuardia, Commissioner Valentine, and the taxpayers of New York, are aware that somebody in the Homicide Bureau has seen fit to put an ordinary detective in charge of these homicides? That this detective does not bother to report in to the

Bureau and that he let a private detective run this case for him? That this detective did not make an arrest last night, in spite of a confession, because, in his own words, he was "late for dinner" and his "wife had made a blueberry pie" for him? That this detective is Jason Jones?

The Argus *demands* that an investigation be made! If the officials of New York were aware of the things mentioned above, then the Argus will demand that an investigation be made of them — from the highest to the lowest!

Why didn't Detective Jason Jones make an arrest last night?

Necessary cursed beneath his breath and glanced at the column again. He hadn't noticed before but it was about two inches shorter than Martin's columns usually ran. Maybe that missing part was the clue to which Martin had referred.

Necessary flung down the paper, paid his bill and left. He got into his car and drove down to the Empire State Building as fast as he could without getting a ticket.

Elsie Poll was sitting at her desk, calmly reading *Esquire*. Necessary sometimes thought that she would go on reading her magazine if there were an earthquake and the building were tumbling down around her ears.

"Any calls?" he asked.

"Nothing but a bunch of goddam reporters smelling around," she answered without looking up.

Necessary was too upset to be bothered by her language. "What happened to them?" he asked.

"I chased them with that baseball bat of yours."

"If they come back, tell them I've gone to Honolulu," Necessary said. He went into his private office and flopped down at his desk. He was so absent-minded he even forgot to toss his hat in the wastebasket.

He threw his long legs up on the desk and pulled at his nose. He frowned. He had made a couple of false starts but he was determined to make up for it. It didn't look to him as if Jason intended to do anything but wait for the murderer to make a mistake and in the meantime he was going to get into plenty of hot water. Necessary liked Jason and he wanted to help him out.

Finally he pulled over a phone book and looked up a number. Then he dialed.

"This Willard Duncan's office?" he asked when a feminine voice answered.

The voice assured him it was.

"Mr. Duncan there?" Necessary asked, being certain he wasn't.

The voice confirmed this, but thought maybe she could help.

"I'll tell you," Necessary said. "This is the Lacey Department Store. We're rather anxious to locate Mrs. Duncan. She has a small bill here, which she has probably forgotten, and we don't seem to have her address. I thought perhaps Mr. Duncan could help us out."

The voice hurried to inform him that Mr. and Mrs. Duncan were separated and that Mr. Duncan could not be held responsible for his wife's debts.

"We understand that," Necessary said, keeping his voice to that level of inanity used by credit managers. "We merely thought Mr. Duncan might be able to give us a mailing address."

The voice told him to wait a minute. A moment later the voice spoke again and told him that Mrs. Duncan could be found at the Hotel Sperry under her maiden name of Estelle Plant.

Necessary said, "Thank you," and hung up.

"I won't be back today, if I can help it," he told his secretary as he dashed out, looking more than ever like Ichabod Crane as he hurried.

He drove uptown and parked a block away from the Hotel Sperry.

Yes, Miss Plant was still at the hotel, the clerk told him, adding a room number and gesturing towards the house phones.

Necessary walked straight past the phones, doubled back across the lobby and entered an elevator. A moment later he was knocking at the door of the room the clerk had told him.

The door opened and an attractive, gray-haired woman looked out.

"Miss Plant?" Necessary asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Mr. Smith. I'm a private investigator but I'm working with the police on a matter which I would like to discuss with you. May I come in?"

"I suppose it has something to do with Willard?" she said.

Necessary nodded.

"All right," she said. She held the door open and Necessary entered. He was feeling better already.

She evidently had a two-room suite as he found himself in a small living room.

"I read about a murder happening in the home of that Johnny Bell," she said, "and I supposed that Willard would have to get mixed up some way. He always does when it's anything concerned with that Bell. What's he done now?"

"I'm not sure he's done anything," Necessary said. "I wanted to ask you when you saw your husband last?"

"About two years ago," she said.

"You haven't seen him at all recently?"

"No."

"Have you been planning to go back to your husband?"

"Goodness, no. Whatever put that in your head?"

"You haven't even discussed it with your husband?" Necessary asked.

"No. I told you I haven't seen or spoken with him in two years."

"Did you know this Manny Ladd that was killed day before yesterday?"

"I don't believe so. I don't recall the name."

"It isn't any of my business," Necessary said, "but would you mind telling me why you left your husband?"

"Not at all," she said. "I left him because he was married to Johnny Bell, not to me. Half the time I didn't see him for weeks. I finally told him he had to choose between Johnny Bell and me. He didn't give up Bell, so I left. Now, young man, what's this all about?"

"There was a second murder there last night," Necessary said. "You probably haven't read the morning paper or you'd know that. We just about had the crime pinned on Johnny Bell when your husband confessed to the crime. He said that he killed Manny Ladd because he had been on the point of making up with you and that Manny Ladd had talked you out of it."

"The fool," she said. "I sometimes think that Willard Duncan lost his brains when he met Johnny Bell. He was willing to do anything for him and I guess he hasn't changed. He always said that Johnny Bell would make his fortune for him. But I always thought that Willard had more sense than to risk his life for Bell. No, I guess not. Is Willard in jail?"

"No. The detective in charge of the case didn't believe his confession so he wasn't arrested. Thanks very much, Miss Plant. I won't bother you any more."

"That's all right, young man," she said. She walked with him to the door.

"I have no intention of going back to Willard," she said as Necessary was

about to leave. "But if there's anything I can do to help him, let me know. I owe him that much."

"I will," Necessary said. "And thanks again."

When he reached the lobby, he hunted up the public phone booths and found another number in the directory. He stepped into a booth and dialed.

"Equity," a feminine voice answered.

"I'm trying to locate an actor," Necessary said. "A big, tall blond fellow. I think he plays juvenile leads. His name is Kim Searles. Would you be able to tell me where I could find him?"

"Is it for a role in a show?"

"Yes," Necessary answered, not adding that it was for a part in a murder show.

"Just a moment, please."

He had to feed another nickel into the phone before the voice came back on.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but our records show that Mr. Searles is now employed by Paramount Pictures on the Coast."

"Thanks," Necessary said and hung up.

He glanced at his watch and saw it was ten o'clock, six o'clock in the morning in California and much too early to call a studio. That would have to wait.

He hurried out to his car and headed for the Bronx.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE LOCKED ROOM

HELEN JONES opened the door. She smiled as she recognized Necessary.

"You'll find Jason in the kitchen as usual," she said. "Go right on in."

Necessary walked back to the kitchen. This time Jason was dressed. There was a big pile of bread in front of him and two jars of jelly. A plate and cup were already set across from him.

"You're late," Jason said. "Sit down and have some bread and jelly. It ain't quite as hot as it was yesterday but it's just as good. This is my third breakfast."

"You're as bad as Nero," Necessary said. "Have you see this morning's *Argus*?"

Jason nodded.

"Not only seen it," he said cheerfully, "but discussed it with Captain Haig, somebody from the Mayor's office, a guy named Something Mabel from the Commissioner's office, not to mention reporters from the *Mirror*, *News*, *Times*, *Post*, *Telegram*, *Tribune*, *Sun*, *AP*, *PM*, *International News*, and *United Press*. I figure the phone company has made enough money from calls here this morning to keep the president in golf tees for a week."

"What did you say to them?"

"I couldn't resist it," Jason said, chuckling. "When this guy from the Commissioner's office — I think his name was Joseph or William Mabel — asked me about it, I said, 'Ain't it awful, Mabel.' I'm afraid he was upset."

"You'll be crucified," Necessary said. "How can you sit here, stuffing your belly, when everyone's after your hide?"

"Don't fret," Jason said calmly. He took another slice of bread. "I've been through all this before, son. All I have to do is hand them over a murderer today and they'll forget all about it. The *Argus* will call me a sterling character and demand that the Commissioner promote me. People are just the same now as they were in old Roman days. All they want is to see someone thrown to the lions and they don't much care who it is. Have some bread and jelly."

He picked up the Silex and poured Necessary some coffee.

Necessary absent-mindedly took a slice of bread and started to butter it.

"What are you going to do?" he asked. "Duncan's confession doesn't hold up."

"So you were sleuthing again," Jason said. "I sort of thought you were. You picked up something, eh?"

"I found Mrs. Duncan," Necessary said. "She hasn't even seen her husband for two years and wasn't thinking about going back with him. She never met Manny Ladd in her life."

Jason nodded and took a big drink of coffee.

"I thought maybe you'd look her up," he said. "Good work. Of course, I knew it was a phony confession last night when he made it. But if we had accepted it, we could have arrested Duncan, he would have come to trial in a couple of months and been turned loose. Then all the clues would have been cold and the murderer would have been safe."

"How did you know the confession wasn't kosher last night?" Necessary wanted to know.

"One of those little things," Jason said. "I guess you just happened not to catch it. He said he fixed the locked room by taking the hinges off the door and then putting them back on. But we had looked at the hinges. Remember? It was obvious that none of the screws had been out. Then too he played for time, when I asked him to tell why he killed Manny Ladd, so he could think up a good story. He thought we were going to cart Johnny Bell off to jail and was trying to save his meal ticket. He knew it wouldn't stick against him."

"How was the door gimmicked? You got an idea?"

"Nothing to it, son. There was only one way that kind of door could be fixed. The murderer unscrewed the part around the knob, turned the lock and screwed the plate back on. That wouldn't take but a minute. But did it ever occur to you what a job it would be to take a loose door, fit the lock into the sill and then hold it there while you screwed the hinges back on? It's all right maybe for stories but it would be almost a two-man job if you ever tried it. Lots of ways that a regular door could be fixed but I think there's only the one convenient way to fix that kind."

"Incidentally," Necessary said, "I also checked up on Kim Searles. Remember one of your men saw somebody who answered his description? I called Equity and they said their records show he's working for Paramount Pictures in Hollywood. Of course, that doesn't mean that it couldn't have been him. He might have flown here. I thought we could call Hollywood later. It's a little too early now."

Jason chuckled.

"You know who that blond fellow was?" he asked.

"You mean you know?" Necessary asked, discomfited.

Jason nodded.

"I had a hunch at the time and I checked it this morning. He was a fellow the insurance company sent out to sort of keep an eye on their policy holder, Johnny Bell. They didn't particularly want us to know they didn't trust us, so the fellow made himself scarce when he saw Patterson heading his way. But that's who it was."

"Then Searles probably is in Hollywood."

"I wouldn't be surprised. You got any more ideas, son?"

"I think," Necessary said doggedly, "that my guess of Johnny Bell was

the best. It still sounds good to me. But I'm curious about what you told the Commissioner and the Mayor."

"Didn't tell them anything," Jason said promptly. "It never does to tell people like that too much. The more they know, the more they think they have to do. But if you act sort of mysterious, they begin to think you've got some special information. But I told Captain Haig that I'd hand him the murderer before one o'clock."

"That doesn't give you much time," Necessary said. "Think you can do it?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "No trouble at all."

"What makes you so sure that you'll know who the murderer is by then!"

"Already know."

"You mean that it is Bell?"

"Nope. I've known who it was ever since last night, but I was a little worried about proving it. But I think maybe we got him worried enough now to do the trick. You see there were two confessions meant to stop us and they didn't. He's had all night to worry now."

"But if you knew who the murderer was why didn't you arrest him last night? He could have worried just as well in jail."

"Wanted to think about it," Jason said. "Wasn't any danger of him getting away with plenty of cops around. Although he did make a try. One of the men reported that somebody tried to slip out of the house about two o'clock this morning but went back in when our man shouted. There weren't any more attempts."

"Didn't the detective try to find out who it was?"

"He had orders not to."

"I still think it would have been safer to stick him in jail, if you knew who it was."

Jason shook his head.

"A murderer," he said, "is just like the Commissioner and the Mayor. The less he knows about what you're thinking the more he gives you credit for. After a bit he begins to think that everything is a trap and he gets so careful that he gets tangled up in his own feet."

"How'd you guess who the murderer is?"

"Didn't guess. It's been kind of obvious from the beginning only it took about a day for it to dawn on me."

"Fain?" Necessary hazarded.

Jason chuckled.

"You'll know before one o'clock," he said. "But you did all right on this case, Smith."

"Except that I evidently didn't solve it."

"Well, it was your first murder case and you were maybe a little confused. There were a lot of things that were sort of confusing if you didn't know what to look for. I wouldn't feel too bad about it if I were you."

"Who do you think tipped off the paper about the confession? Bell?"

"Probably. He feels he's being persecuted because the murderer wasn't arrested before the murders happened."

"You know," Necessary said, "I'm getting to the point where I could almost kill that guy myself. And I'd certainly pay the five hundred dollar retainer for the privilege of smacking him in the nose."

"Be a little high," Jason said. "That was one of the troubles with this case. You were always too conscious of Johnny Bell."

"He's about as unpleasant a rat as I ever expect to meet," Necessary growled. "Every time I'm around him for a few minutes, I feel as if I need a bath!"

"It's too bad that the public will never get to read that column Ray Martin was going to do on him. But it probably wouldn't have done any good."

"That reminds me," Necessary said. "I was going to ask you about Martin. He told us that there would be a clue in his column. I figured that it was all in the part he hadn't written, but then I remembered that he was very careful to hide a sheet of paper when we entered yesterday. But I'm damned if I can find anything in that printed column."

"I think he meant most of it to be in the part he was going to write," Jason admitted. "At the same time, I expect that he thought he was giving us a clue in his first paragraph. I wouldn't be surprised if Ray Martin partly suspected Johnny Bell in the beginning too. He may have begun to doubt it when he went to the house. He found out his mistake too late. The 'Achilles heel of a heel' — a horrible phrase — was probably meant to point to that.

"But Martin made the same mistake you made — and that a lot of others would make. He let his personal emotions rule him when he tried to analyze the crime. I don't like Johnny Bell any better than you do but when I think about the murder, he's no better or worse than anyone else involved."

"How about the serial number on that gun — I mean the .22?" Necessary asked.

"Unregistered. I expected as much when I saw it. It was an old model, probably kicking around since Prohibition days. One thing, Smith, you can take my word for in this case. The murderer was really smart. In fact, he was the smartest murderer I remember running into in a long time. He covered himself on every move, sometimes at the price of his own ego. Right now, if he wanted to be stubborn, we couldn't go into court with anything but circumstantial evidence. It might be strong enough, but I think he'll break. Not only because we sort of wore him down but because he realizes by now that he's lost even if we don't get him. And he can't commit another murder. Our best chance is to convict him on the first murder. The evidence is the strongest there."

"I don't get it," Necessary admitted.

"You will," Jason said. He glanced at his watch and sighed regretfully. "It's eleven-thirty. I guess we better go down and finish it. Captain Haig won't be able to digest his lunch if we don't hurry.

"But I'll tell you. When it's all finished, you'll come up here for dinner tonight. Helen's going to make old-fashioned apple dumplings. And then you can go up and look over my greenhouse. I've got a Fair Emily that I'll guarantee is one of the best geraniums you ever saw in your life."

"Geraniums," muttered Necessary. "You and your damned geraniums. You know what you are, Jason? You're a poor man's Nero Wolfe!"

"Once you get over your bashfulness you'll be all right," Jason said, chuckling. Obviously he was pleased at the remark.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MURDER GETS A PLUG

THEY HAD almost reached Johnny Bell's before either of them spoke again. Then Jason Jones, who had been puffing rapidly on his cigarette and staring through the instrument panel, lifted his head and noted the street number.

"Where are you going?" he asked mildly.

"Why, to Bell's," Necessary answered, surprise in his voice. "You said we were going to clean up this case. If you are, then you certainly want to go to Bell's."

"That doesn't follow in just that order," Jason said. "You see you go jumping off on tangents. Knew a fellow once who almost got killed because he went off on tangents. It was during The Case of the Missing G-String. Fellow was one of the comedians, the baggy pants kind. He took the G-string for a gag but the result was four people were murdered. He was almost the fifth. I remember he — "

"I thought it was this case we were going to clear up," Necessary interrupted dryly. "Or do you just want me to drive around while you recite your memoirs?"

"You are an ingrate," grumbled Jason. "An insufferable ingrate. Probably mistreated your grandmother when you were a small boy. . . . We are going to the *Argus* — if this car of yours will hold up for that long."

"You act as if I had a dozen C gas cards," Necessary answered, turning into Lexington Avenue and heading south. "Are you going to the *Argus* for any particular reason, or do you just feel like reading the funny page before going on?"

"We," Jason said thoughtfully, lighting a fresh cigarette, "have been dopes."

"Speak for yourself," Necessary replied. "Every time I mention the fact that I've been a dope during some part of the case, you tell me that I'm being unfair to myself."

"The point which we overlooked," said the fat detective, ignoring Necessary's remarks, "was Ray Martin. If we had spent a little more time concentrating on him, he might still be alive."

"I don't see how," Necessary objected.

"It's all the fault of Bell and Fain," grumbled Jason. "We had too much of them. Every time we turned around we'd bump into the personality of one of them. That's the reason that their kind succeed in life and are seldom defeated. Pleasant or otherwise, their personalities are always pushing in on you so that you can't ignore them. It gets so you think of them even when you don't want to. . . ."

"The murder case," Necessary reminded for, it seemed to him, the thousandth time.

Jason Jones scowled at him and then went back to puffing his cigarette.

"All right, all right," he said. "But I should have caught on when we talked to Martin. He must have already had some slight inkling of the identity of the murderer but led us away from it with all the talk of people who might like to kill Bell. Guess you can't cure a newspaperman — even a gossip columnist — of wanting to scoop everybody. He probably thought he was going to turn up the murderer and make us look sort of foolish. Instead, he got killed. But I should have caught on then and found some way of getting his information."

Necessary Smith couldn't resist taking a sly dig at Jason.

"I thought all we had to do was wait for the murderer to make a mistake," he said.

"That's right," Jason answered, nodding thoughtfully. "The only trouble is that the murderer's mistake was caught by Ray Martin and we neglected to pry the information from Martin. There is still nothing wrong with my theory, but I neglected to follow it."

"Okay," Necessary said, acknowledging with a grin that he wasn't able to pin Jason. "But why are we going to the *Argus?* It doesn't seem likely that Martin would tell anyone there what he had learned."

"Quite right. But do you remember what he told us?"

"Only that we could read it in his column — then he finally promised to give you a ring just before it hit the stands. But there was nothing in the column that tipped off his clue."

"No," Jason admitted. "At the last minute he must have decided to leave it for another column. Maybe he wanted to get more information, or maybe he had some other reason for holding it up while he went to Bell's house to see the murderer. I expect we'll never know now. But we can find out what he had in mind. Somewhere in his office there must be some notes he had on the subject — maybe even the beginning of that section of his column. His department was shorter than usual this morning. Maybe he even had the tip written but wanted to check on one thing, then call the paper and tell them to put it in."

"If he didn't write it down, we'll be completely out of luck," Necessary commented.

"No," Jason said. "I know who he will name as the murderer — and he's right."

"You know?" roared Necessary. "Then why the hell are we doing this wild-goose chase?"

"Have to tie up all the loose ends. I like to have everything neat-like when I turn it over to the captain. And it'll keep the *Argus* from yelling that one of their men dug up clues that the police couldn't find."

Necessary chuckled. "I was wondering if you were going to consider your press notices."

"Newspapers," Jason said, "are just as happy if they can praise the cops as if they can tear them down. The only important thing is to be sure they have headlines. Give them that and they're happy. Who am I that I should keep a newspaper from being happy?"

By this time they had reached Forty-Second Street. A big uniformed cop stood at the intersection, adding emphasis to the sign that declared no left turns were allowed.

"I'll have to go down to Fortieth Street and over," Necessary muttered.

"Go ahead and turn left," Jason answered. "You shouldn't put so much belief in signs."

"I'd forgotten the law was riding with me," Necessary said.

He pulled to the left, circling around the sign. A stream of cars was going North on Lexington so that he had to stop less than a foot from the patrolman and the sign. The cop gazed down at the sign beside him and then lifted his eyes to Necessary, a bland expression settling over his face.

"Well, now," he said, a touch of brogue in his voice, "I'm expecting that it's your first visit to town and you ain't used to signs. Or maybe it is that you can't read!"

Before Necessary could answer, Jason leaned over against the steering wheel and poked his face as near to the window as he could get it.

"Clancy," he said, "you should stop hovering over your street signs as though you expected them to hatch a bunch of little signs."

The patrolman's eyes shifted to this new face and then recognition blossomed on his face.

"Jonesy," he cried. "It's good to be seeing that fat, ugly face again! Was you wantin' to turn down Forty-Second?"

"And would we be wanting to park here?" retorted Jason.

"Why didn't you say so?" the patrolman asked. He blew a quick blast on his whistle and waved a car to a stop in the middle of the intersection.

"Back up," he commanded the astonished driver. "Back it up and be quick about it. Can't you see that it's the commissioner himself who is wanting by?"

Necessary put the car in gear and they drove down Forty-Second Street, waved on by a cheery grin from the patrolman.

"There's a man who'll go far," Jason Jones said. "He's very fond of geraniums."

"Looks like you have to be fond of geraniums to get anywhere on the police force," Necessary said with a grin.

"Might be something to that," Jason said seriously. "I used to have that same corner that Clancy has. Then, right after I got interested in geraniums, I was put on the detective squad."

"Guess I'll just remain a failure," Necessary said as he pulled the car to the curb and stopped.

The *Argus* building was just west of the *News* building on Forty-Second Street. Necessary parked as near as he could and they walked into the building. A pretty receptionist at the information desk directed them upstairs to the city editor's office. They took the elevator to the third floor and walked past the clattering typewriters to the office where Jason identified himself.

"I won't retract one word of that editorial," the city editor said emphatically as soon as he recognized Jason.

"Wouldn't want you to," Jason said complacently. "Thought it was a first rate editorial myself. Good idea to run editorials like that once in a while. It keeps the police up on their toes."

"You mean that editorial is going to make you get up on your toes?" the astonished editor asked.

"Not exactly. I don't pay much attention to them myself, but I approve of them as a general thing."

"If you didn't come up to raise hell about that editorial," the editor said, suspicion replacing the astonishment in his voice, "what did you come for? Don't tell me you just dropped in for a cup of tea!"

"Nope," Jason said. "I'd like to see Ray Martin's office and maybe take a look at his desk."

"What? Another one! Okay, come along." The city editor got up from his desk and led the way back through the clattering typewriters to an office four doors from his own.

"Martin didn't have any other copy that he turned in to you, did he?" Jason asked casually as they entered the columnist's cubicle.

"No. Think he should have?"

"I was just wondering."

"So you think he had some copy with the name of the murderer in it?" the editor said. "I see you still want the *Argus* men to do your work for you, even after being killed! I think if Ray'd had anything like that he would have turned it over to me. But you're welcome to look — as long as I keep an eye on you."

The next several minutes were silent as Jason and Necessary went through the desk. They found plenty of notes on gossip, some scribbled by Martin himself, some in letters and some in notes from his secretary, but nothing that seemed to have any bearing on the murder.

"Judas doesn't seem to have been so unusual after all," Necessary commented dryly, throwing down a letter which gave Martin the lowdown on a family divorce.

"Wait a minute," Jason suddenly said, straightening up from one of the drawers. He lighted a cigarette and stared dreamily through the smoke at the city editor. "I just remembered what you said when I told you I wanted to see this office. You muttered something about 'another one.' What did that mean?"

"Just what I said — another one," the editor replied wearily. "Some dame came in here this morning and talked me into letting her see his office. She pawed around the desk but didn't take anything — although maybe she did since you're so sure there was something here to take."

"Who was she?"

"Said she was one of Ray's contributors and that she had sent him something yesterday but made a mistake and mailed a letter which was meant for someone else. She finally convinced me that she was on the level so I let her in here, but stayed to keep an eye on her."

"But not a very good eye," Jason said sourly. "Did she find her letter?"

"No. She finally gave up and said it wasn't important any way. I thought that funny. . . . There was something else funny about that dame too."

"What?"

"She seemed like such a nice dame — I thought maybe she was one of them debutantes. But one of the copyboys came in later and said when she was leaving she stubbed her toe just as she went past his desk. He said he never heard such swearing in his life. He wanted to bet that she cussed for fifteen minutes without repeating herself."

"That's no sign that she isn't from Park — " Necessary began only to

brake off suddenly. "Did this dame maybe have nice brown hair and the kind of eyes that would make you want to go out and do a Lizzie Borden on your grandmother?" he asked.

The editor nodded.

"Come on, Jason," Necessary said. "I know where the missing part of the column — if there is one — is."

"Where?" Jason asked as he waddled after Necessary.

"Wait and you'll see," was all that Necessary would say. Downstairs, he turned the car around and headed west. At Fifth Avenue, he turned downtown and parked when they reached Thirty-Fourth Street. He led the way into the Empire State Building.

It seemed to the two men that Elsie Poll, Necessary's secretary, was sitting in exactly the same position as when they had entered the office the day before. Her chair was tilted back in the same way and her feet were up on the desk apparently in the same spot. She was reading a magazine — perhaps even the same magazine, Jason thought — turning the pages lazily.

As they entered, she lowered the magazine a trifle and glanced up at Necessary. Jason noticed, for the first time, that she was one of those girls who are beautiful while looking plain.

"Where is it?" Necessary asked.

"What the hell are you talking about?" the girl countered, putting her magazine on the desk. "Don't come stalking in here like a Sun Circuit Hamlet, muttering under your breath. Get to the point."

"You know what I'm talking about," Necessary said. "Where's the notes you took from Ray Martin's desk?"

"If you two Hawkshaws," the girl said scornfully, "didn't spend so much time running around looking like a Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde comedy team, you might be able to find something beside the soup stains on your vests. Even a blind man with the staggers would have realized that there must be something in Martin's desk and would have been over there this morning. Here." She reached into her desk and tossed a sheet of paper to Necessary. He and Jason bent over it. The paragraph was typed in the center of the sheet.

> What flatfoot on the Homicide Detail would give a king's ransom to know the name of the man back of the killing at the local home of a visiting Hollywood hack? Your reporter knows

the answer and has forwarded it to the proper authorities -- in this case, NOT the flatfoot. When it breaks the headlines, don't say that your reporter didn't tell you that the murderer is the man who is also responsible for all the fine plots this same Hollywood hack is credited with . . .

"These columnists are always about as clear as the street directions you get from a cop," Necessary grumbled.

"He knew all right," Jason said. "I guess he just went out to check up on it or maybe he wanted to catch the murderer himself. But he knew who it was all right."

"Jumping bloody hell," said Elsie Poll, swinging her feet down from the desk. "Now you both know! Hell, even I knew who the murderer was just from reading the newspapers! Now that you two have finally stumbled over the truth why the hell don't you get out of here and arrest the murderer and let a girl read in peace?"

With a reproachful glance at the girl, Jason turned and waddled out of the office. Necessary followed, rubbing his nose thoughtfully.

CHAPTER TWENTY

JASON GOES TO TOWN

IT WAS Sergeant Kelly who met them in front of the house. He grinned as he saw Jason, who was already spotted with ashes.

"It's about time you got here," he said. "I had all I could do to keep the captain from coming over here himself. He's foaming at the mouth, but I knew he'd collapse if he was exposed to your methods again. He's never been the same since that last time."

"Everybody inside?" Jason asked.

"Yeah. Just one big happy family. Snell and Patterson are both busy keeping Bell from biting himself and dying of poison. The reporters were here a couple of times but we managed to shoo them away. Snell wanted to punch the *Argus* man, but I managed to restrain him without using a blackjack. I've been expecting the Little Flower to pull up any minute. Maybe

we ought to issue tickets and have an opening. You know, like first nights on Broadway."

"You'd want to scalp the tickets if we did," Jason grunted. "If the Little Flower arrives, he can just wait until I'm through."

"It's a good thing Jason was never promoted," Kelly told Necessary. "He'd have been broken a dozen times. As it is, he's just escaped Flatbush by the skin of his teeth more times than he can count."

"Let's go," Jason said. "You can entertain Smith with your jokes and funny sayings later."

There was a certain solemn aspect about them, as they marched into the house, that reminded Necessary of a funeral. In a way, he thought, it was somebody's funeral.

When they stepped into the living room, it was almost as though they had never left. Yet there was a subtle difference. Everyone sat in the same place that he had occupied the night before. But there was tension in every face, as though nerves were taut to the point of breaking. Even Gregor Fain was quiet. Willard Duncan, chin in hand, stared moodily across the room. He looked old.

Only Johnny Bell was unchanged. His flannels were immaculate. His coat screamed Hollywood Boulevard. His bright yellow scarf, decorated with running horses, made his thin face look more sallow.

Betty Bell was missing.

"Mrs. Bell," Detective Snell said, "is upstairs. She said she'd be down right away."

Jason nodded.

Just then the door opened and Betty Bell appeared. She was wearing a full-cut gabardine suit that concealed — but not completely — the still-young curves of her body. For the first time her beautiful face was enhanced by make-up. She carried a small bag which she set down inside the door.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Johnny Bell asked as she crossed the room and sat down.

"As soon as Mr. Jones is finished," she said levelly, "I am leaving."

"You're what?"

"I'm leaving you," she said succinctly. "I've stuck for a long time, Johnny. I don't know why, but I guess maybe it hurts to admit you can't make a go of your marriage. It's a failing. I've put up with a lot. Not only your women, but other things.

"But I stuck it out. I guess I kept hoping that you would change, that in some miraculous way you'd become a new man. A woman sometimes develops a blind spot in regard to a man she has loved. I might have gone on like that forever — I don't know — in spite of the fact that I saw you more clearly the last two days than I've seen you in all these years. Even that might not have awakened me if it hadn't been for Bennett. I've always felt badly about him. Manny could hold his own with you — so could Willard — but he was clean in a way that you'll never know. When he found courage to break away from you — well, somehow it gave me courage."

Necessary felt like applauding.

"So you're finally leaving me for another guy," Johnny Bell sneered. "I always suspected you of being that kind."

"No, I'm not leaving you for what you call another guy. I'm leaving you for myself."

"You won't get any dough from me," Johnny said. "Don't think you're going to get a juicy alimony to keep some damn gigolo on."

"You wouldn't understand," she said sadly, "but I don't want any of your money. You can even get the divorce yourself if you want to. . . . Let's not discuss it any more. I'm sorry, Mr. Jones. . . ."

"It's all right," Jason said. He had crossed the room and dropped into his favorite chair. "I'd like to ask you one question, Bell."

"Go ahead," Johnny said roughly. "Hurry up with it and get to hell out of here. I think the whole bunch of you are going nuts. What the hell do you want me to do — cry because a couple of guys got bumped off?"

"Although you will deny it," Jason said, "I know that you have in the past borrowed, to put it politely, plots from stories written by others. In the case of the story which fathered your present play, I imagine that legally it belonged to you in spite of the fact that Barlay wrote it. So there's no reason why you shouldn't have used it and admit doing so. I want you to answer this one question completely truthfully. Did you realize that you were using a plot which had already appeared in a detective magazine?"

"No," Johnny said.

"Did you ever read that particular story?"

"Hell, no. Why should I read the stuff that guy writes under my name?"

"As a matter of fact," Jason said, "you never read any of those pulp magazines in which your name appeared, did you?"

"No."

"Where did you get the plot for your play?"

"I thought of it," Johnny snapped. "It was my own idea. How the hell do I know what he wrote?"

"Is it possible that somebody suggested that plot to you?" Jason asked.

"Hell no. You've been listening to a lot of gossip from people that are just jealous. Do you realize, copper, that I get fifteen hundred dollars for the magazine rights alone to a short story? Why the hell should I take plots from some bum who can't get more than a hundred — and maybe not that. It was my own idea. If it happens to be like his, that's no skin off me."

Jason sighed wearily.

"Of course not," he agreed. He turned his head slightly to regard Willard Duncan. "You still stick to that confession you made last night?" he asked.

Willard Duncan said nothing. He continued to stare across the room.

"You damn well better do something about that," Johnny Bell said. "Or did you read the *Argus* this morning?"

"We did a little checking up on your story this morning," Jason said to Duncan, ignoring Johnny. "It wasn't difficult to find that your wife is still in New York. Would you like to know what she said?"

Duncan didn't answer.

"She told us that she hadn't seen you in over two years, that she hadn't even thought of coming back to you and that she didn't know Manny Ladd. But that was a very nice broken-hearted-husband act you put on. Very touching. You might also like to know that we know the lavatory door wasn't taken off at the hinges."

"What do you want from me?" Duncan said hoarsely.

"You made up that confession as you went along, didn't you?" Jason asked.

Duncan nodded, evading the eyes of the others in the room.

"The reason was because you thought that we were going to arrest Johnny Bell for the murders and that we might be able to make it stick on circumstantial evidence. Smith was able to convince you with his logic. You thought you'd confess, knowing that it wouldn't hold water in court but that by the time we discovered that the trail would be cold and we wouldn't stand much chance of convicting Bell. Isn't that true?"

"Yes," Duncan said, his voice barely audible.

"The bigger fool you," Johnny Bell said scornfully. "But you always were a sucker."

"I hate to disappoint you," Jason told him, "but I'm afraid Duncan didn't do it because he admired your pearly white teeth. He was trying to protect his ten per cent."

"Sure," Johnny said bitterly. "I can always be sure of the leeches hanging around. As soon as they spot a guy like me who's headed for the big dough they crowd around."

"Of course," Jason said, "he would have collected fifty thousand dollars if you went to the chair. But Duncan, too, believed that you were headed for bigger things than a hundred thousand dollars a year. I imagine he intended seeing that you got those bigger things. What he expected to collect in the next few years made that fifty thousand seem insignificant."

"How'd he know I wouldn't change agents?" demanded Johnny.

"He didn't. But, while Duncan knew you very well, he made one rather bad mistake in his judgment of you. He thought if nothing else you would be grateful that he had stepped in and saved you and that because of that you would always keep him as your agent. He was gambling on that."

"I said he was a fool," Johnny retorted. "If he wanted to risk his neck for me, that was his business. But sentiment like that is for kids and old women. With me, it's strictly business."

"Exactly," Jason said gravely.

Willard Duncan had his face in his hands and seemed oblivious to what was going on.

"If his confession was phony," Johnny said, "What about that Searles guy? One of your coppers said he saw a big blond guy trying to get in the house."

"There was one big mistake made in this case," Jason said. "Smith made it and I almost did. I think in a way it explains your success, Bell. You have a great deal of energy, all of which is devoted to proving that Johnny Bell is a genius. You are, in a way. The general effect is that even people who hate you reach a point where they can't think of anything but Johnny Bell, so that against their will they have been convinced.

"Your mind only worked one way throughout this case and the others followed suit. If there was going to be an attempted murder, you were the only one big enough to be the victim. You yourself didn't think that anyone else was important enough to be murdered. You thought it so convincingly that everyone started agreeing. I almost did myself. At the same time, that was almost your undoing. When Smith finally arrived at the point of dis-

carding you as the victim, you still loomed so large that he had to pick you as the murderer. Perhaps that was partly wishful thinking too."

"An educated cop," sneered Johnny. "I suppose you'll be giving us a lecture on Freud next."

"You'd be surprised how smart some cops are," Jason said mildly. "You shouldn't form all your ideas about policemen from the books Fain writes. . . . Enough of the facts concerning the murder fitted you that Smith thought he had you — and so did Duncan.

"There was one other mistake that Smith made. He agreed that the murderer had planned brilliantly, and then thought the murderer might have made a mistake in his victim. This murderer made no mistakes. Manny Ladd was meant to die and he died. Ray Martin was meant to die and he died. You, Bell, were the safest person here."

Jason stopped and stared at Johnny from beneath his half closed eyelids.

Necessary realized that despite all Jason's threats to resign, this was what he liked. He was sitting there in a comfortable chair, enjoying himself to the fullest. There was a vast look of contentment on his fat face that spread even to his third chin.

"Your Kim Searles," Jason went on, "has been in Hollywood all the time. That blond menace was a man from the insurance company. They too have been worried about your welfare."

"Very touching," Johnny said.

The door opened and a plainclothesman stuck his head in.

"There's a reporter out here from the *Argus*," he said. "He says he's going to see you or else."

"I'll take care of him," Snell growled and started for the door.

"Now, now," Jason said chidingly. "Let him come in, Steve."

The plainclothesman vanished and a moment later the reporter came in. He was a serious-looking young man, well-dressed in a conservative way. He glanced around the room until his eyes fell on Jason.

"Bates of the *Argus*," he said. "You're Jones, aren't you?"

Jason nodded.

"I thought so. All I want is —"

"I'll tell you," Jason said pleasantly. "You sit down over there on that couch and just keep your ears open."

"Have you made an arrest yet?"

"Nope, but you stick around and you can hear it made."

"I get it," the reporter said. "You think if you let me sit in on the kill, you'll get an apology from the *Argus* on that editorial. Well —"

"Nope," Jason said again. "Don't want an apology. Wouldn't do any good anyway. Nobody ever reads apologies. Besides I enjoyed that editorial. You just sit there and be quiet. As Captain Haig would say, the gentlemen of the press are always welcome."

"I'm Johnny Bell," Johnny said, stopping in front of the reporter.

"I'd never have guessed," the reporter said sarcastically. He glanced at Johnny's scarf and then turned back to face Jason.

"This," Jason said, indicating Willard Duncan, "is Mr. Duncan, the man who made that confession you were worried about. The confession wasn't exactly accurate, but you can get the details on that later.

"I was just sort of holding forth on the fact that the murderer was smart. He only made one real mistake and that didn't have anything to do with catching him. There was another clue but it didn't point to him directly. You might call him the murderer with the fiction mind. That might make a good headline for you."

The reporter grinned and scribbled on a folded sheet of paper.

"What makes you so sure he was smart?" he asked.

"I'll tell you," Jason said. "It wasn't just the way he committed the murders, but the way he sort of covered every angle. He covered himself seven ways from Sunday on the murder of Manny Ladd. To begin with, he gave Bell the plot for his play. That way, he knew what was going to happen before it happened when it appeared that nobody knew. He didn't just give Bell the plot. I expect Bell thought the plot was original with him, as he always did.

"Anyway, this murderer knows what's going to happen. So he slips his bullet into the gun that he knows Johnny will use. He may have even suggested using the gun in such a way that Bell thought it was his idea. But all the way through there is nothing to connect the murderer with the gun. If Bell had asked him to go get it, he would have found some way out. But Bell didn't. He asked Manny which was what the murderer hoped.

"He also knew that Johnny Bell wouldn't miss a chance to show off by demonstrating that the gun was empty. He had done it many times before, always in the same way. It was made easier this time when Duncan wondered if the gun was empty. Bell obliged the murderer and then handed the

gun to Miss Russell. The bullet was then in the chamber next to the hammer and ready for the dirty business."

Jason paused for breath and then continued.

"Now look how he was covered. He hadn't touched the gun. Only Manny, Bell and Miss Russell had touched it, and Miss Russell had pulled the trigger. Nothing to connect him. But on top of that he helped to bring out the fact that everyone knew about Johnny Bell's liking for demonstrating that a gun was empty by putting it to his head and pulling the trigger. That meant that Manny Ladd knew it too. He knew it would come out that Manny was in love with Bell's wife and that she was too fine a person to respond to that love as long as she was married to Bell. So it would look natural that Manny had set a death trap and then fallen into it himself. In a way, Manny helped this out. He probably noticed that the chamber which was supposed to be empty wasn't and he started to call attention to it when Bell told Miss Russell to fire. It made it look as if he was trying to stave off what he knew was going to happen.

"But if that failed, the murderer still had another trick. He hadn't given Bell an original plot as much as he wanted to. The plot had come from a story originally written by Bennett Barlay. So Barlay was one person who knew what was going to happen in advance. He also had a few reasons why he might have wanted to kill Bell.

"He may even have considered the fact that Miss Hayes was in love with Manny Ladd and he didn't pay any attention to her. Woman scorned and all that. And she was the one other person who could know what Bell had written. She also had access to Bell's study and could have loaded the gun.

"So the murderer had four outs, although he probably hoped that we would pick the one that pointed to Manny Ladd. That would end the case very conveniently.

"But Manny Ladd had evidently said something to Ray Martin which he coupled with something else and which made him suspicious of the real murderer. He came to the house to check on that suspicion. And the murderer was ready for him.

"This time the murderer didn't have as much time to plan but he was ingenious just the same. He knew everyone was upstairs all afternoon so he would not have much trouble killing Martin downstairs. He already had a gun, which he knew couldn't be traced to him. The pencil, with which the

confession was made, and the screwdriver both came from Bell's study — as Duncan had in *his* confession. That might lead us off on a tangent in the direction of Bell.

"But here again, in looking for an out, the murderer's mind ran to fiction. Not original fiction, which wouldn't have served his purpose. Instead he handed us a locked room which had the appearance of one already manufactured. It came from a mystery novel by Gregor Fain.

"But if all these outs failed, the murderer still had another ace up his sleeve. A super-super ace, he thought, and one which had once worked in real life. He thought that if everything else failed him that would at least give him impunity for his crimes. It would have been brilliant — if it had worked."

"Sounds like a lot of malarkey to me," jeered Johnny.

"He's just making like Mycroft Holmes," Gregor Fain said, grinning. "He gets spells like that."

"So he was smart," the reporter said, ignoring the remarks of Fain and Bell, "but evidently you were smarter since you saw through them."

"Maybe," Jason said in evident enjoyment. The ash from his cigarette was trickling over his vest, but he didn't notice it. "Maybe. But mainly it was just a question of waiting for the murderer to make enough mistakes. That's about all you can say about any murder case."

"And who is the murderer?" the reporter asked.

"I'm coming to it," Jason said, a little nettled. "Don't rush me. You'll only confuse me."

"He's always like that," Snell said. "You got to humor him or he'll throw the whole case up."

"Wait a minute," Necessary Smith said excitedly. "I'm beginning to get it. I was partly right then, if I had only stuck to it."

Jason nodded cheerfully.

"That's right," he said. "I thought you'd start seeing it pretty soon. Considering the pattern there never was more than one person who could have been the murderer if you realized that he wasn't going to make any mistake like murdering the wrong man."

He turned to look at Willard Duncan.

"Duncan, you lied when you gave us that fancy description of how you committed the two murders, didn't you?"

"I admitted it," Duncan said. "Do you have to keep bringing that up?"

"But," Jason said slowly, "you didn't lie when you said that you did kill them."

There was a moment of silence in the room while Jason and Willard Duncan stared at each other. Then Duncan dropped his eyes. The very flesh on his face seemed to have sagged.

"You mean that he gave you a phony confession but that he's still guilty?" the reporter asked.

Jason nodded.

"I ain't never surprised at anything that Jason's mixed up in any more," Snell muttered to Necessary.

"We took too many things for granted about Johnny Bell," Jason said. "One was that he always *stole* plots. Actually we knew all the time that Duncan often gave him plots — in fact furnished most of them. That was the only reason that Bell kept him as his agent. Because Bell was really aware of the fact, even though he wouldn't admit it. And Duncan was always smart enough to do it in such a fashion that Bell could think it was his own idea. But as soon as we learned that Bell's present plot was similar to another plot, we took it for granted that he had taken it. And that led us off on the wrong trail. Once we forgot about that and considered the murderer knowing the plot because he had given it to Bell, Duncan was the only suspect."

"But why did he murder Ladd?" the reporter asked.

"You know a funny thing," Jason said. "Necessary Smith here had the whole case solved a long time ago only he had it in two pieces and it didn't make sense. The first time he had the right murderer but the wrong motives and the wrong victim. The second time he had the right motives but the wrong murderer.

"Manny Ladd did hate Johnny Bell — which didn't make him particularly a freak. And he did want to fix Bell, because he thought it might give him a chance with Mrs. Bell. That is he thought it would show Bell up in his true light and she would leave him. He had threatened to fix Bell several times so everyone thought he didn't intend to go through with it. But he did. Ray Martin told us that, but we didn't pay enough attention to it. For a long time, Manny Ladd had been gathering proof of Bell's stunts that would ruin him if it was published and could be proved. Hollywood is more scared of scandal than anything else.

"We'll probably never know what Manny Ladd had in mind, but he must have been sure of it or he wouldn't have even mentioned it to Ray Martin.

He had waited too long to go off half-cocked. Bell admits he overheard Manny mentioning it to Martin. Duncan also overheard it.

"Willard Duncan is not a young man any more. He's devoted all of his time in recent years to Johnny Bell. The only other clients he has are a few minor writers who are really handled by his secretary. It is doubtful if he could get any other big clients and he didn't want to go through the agony of building another one up. Besides, he had taken too much from Bell not to cash in on it. And he saw his major income vanishing if Manny succeeded in ruining Bell. It wasn't only his present income; he was expecting to make a lot more in the future. So Manny Ladd had to die.

"Like I told you, he planned it carefully. It had all the earmarks of a good plotter — which Duncan is. He can't write but he can plot. If you glance at some of Bell's stories you'll find about half of them have that careful interweaving with three or four possibilities. I know because I read about fifteen of his stories last night.

"Another thing we sort of forgot was that Duncan could be in and out of Bell's study a dozen times and nobody would think anything of it. So he plotted the scene with the killing in it, probably suggested the use of the gun, put the bullet in the gun and later asked Bell if he was sure it was empty, knowing that Bell would put the gun to his head and pull the trigger enough times to bring the real bullet into place. That too was clever. It looked — if you didn't know that Bell had done that in the exact way dozens of times before — as if the murderer either wanted to kill Bell or was willing to risk killing him. That would be just the opposite of Duncan's real motive and so would point away from him if we ever did look in his direction. But there wasn't any risk."

"What about Martin?" the reporter asked as Jason stopped to light another cigarette.

"I've already told you that," Jason said. "Martin must have suspected him and came out to check up. Duncan was partly telling the truth in his confession when he covered the killing of Martin. I think he was up in the bathroom shaving when he saw Martin arrive. He made sure that Martin was alone and he went downstairs, pulled the gun on him and forced him to go into the lavatory. He had already taken the screwdriver and the blue pencil from Bell's study, right after he heard that Martin was coming over, and had fixed the confession.

"He had borrowed the locked room idea from one of Fain's books, hoping

that we'd suspect him if we didn't fall for the confession business. It must have hurt Duncan to take an idea from Fain, because he had more originality than either Fain or Bell. But he was playing safe.

"He killed Martin, placed the newspaper under him, cleaned off the gun, pressing Martin's hand against it and dropped it on the floor. Then he went out, closed the door and took off the plate through which the knob goes. Then he could reach inside and turn the lock, and put the plate back on. The whole thing took only a few minutes and I doubt if he ran much risk of being caught. The only one who was liable to walk in on him was the maid and he could hear her if she started up from the basement. He wiped off the handle of the screwdriver and was back upstairs finishing his shaving."

"What about his confession?"

"He may have had that in mind as a last resort," Jason said, "but the thing that brought it on was thinking that Bell was going to be arrested. He probably was amazed to hear Smith describing all of his motives so accurately and then pinning them on Bell. The funny thing is that it sounded reasonable and a jury would have probably believed it about Bell. I doubt if he could have proved his innocence. It would have all been circumstantial evidence and he might not have gotten the chair, but Duncan didn't want that.

"While Smith was pinning the crimes on Bell, I was watching Duncan. His face went through more changes than a movie character actor's. I could see he was convinced that Smith's reconstruction of the case would stand up. He had to do something or his two murders had been committed in vain. So he confessed.

"At the same time, I guess he felt he was making himself safer too. He probably knew about a case like that in England. It was several years ago. A man — I don't just remember his name — committed a murder and then went to a newspaper and sold them his confession to the crime. They turned him over to the police and he was tried. At the trial, it was discovered that his whole confession was based on evidence which couldn't possibly be true. He was freed and for a time it was thought that he had just been after publicity. When they got him for a second murder, they discovered that he really had committed the first one.

"Duncan probably figured on something like that. If we had arrested him and brought him to trial, his lawyer would have exposed the whole thing and he would have been turned loose. Then even if we had proof we could

never try him for these murders again."

"Smart," the reporter admitted.

"Dumb," Johnny Bell snapped. "Can you imagine that louse thinking he was smart enough to get away with anything? Why, he couldn't even cheat at poker without getting caught. And I have to have a lousy agent like that! This'll do me a lot of good! Like hell!"

Willard Duncan raised his head again and stared at Johnny Bell. There was pain in his eyes.

"Don't you understand, Johnny?" he asked. "Don't you see? I did it for you. They were going to ruin you. I was trying to save you."

"In a pig's eye," Johnny sneered. "You were just trying to save your own scrawny neck. Why, do you think for a minute that two rats like Manny Ladd and Ray Martin could do anything that would ruin Johnny Bell? Do you think anybody would believe them? There'd be a hundred million people on my side. All the people who have laughed and cried over my stories. Don't try to use me as an excuse, Killer Duncan."

As Johnny had talked, Duncan's face had drained of its last bit of color. He sagged forward in his chair and for a moment they thought he was going to fall.

"All right," he said, but his voice was so low that they could barely hear him.

"That was your biggest mistake," Jason told him gently. "As well as you knew Johnny Bell, you didn't know him well enough to know that he would never be grateful for anything you or anyone else did. He will always consider it his right, that nothing but the best of all possible things can happen to Johnny Bell."

"Why not?" Johnny demanded. "I pay for the best. I tear my heart and guts out over every story to pay for the best."

"Heart and guts of sawdust," Necessary Smith muttered.

"All right," Willard Duncan said again. He straightened his shoulders. "You're right, Jones. I'm ready."

Jason nodded at Sergeant Kelly. The sergeant stepped forward beside Duncan, but his expression said that he'd rather be arresting someone else. And his eyes were on Johnny Bell.

"Willard Duncan," he mumbled, "In the name of the law, I arrest you for the murders of Manny Ladd and Ray Martin and let me . . ."

The rest of it was mouthed so low it couldn't be heard, but no one was listening.

"You going back to the Homicide Bureau from here?" the reporter asked Jason, getting to his feet and stuffing his paper in his pocket.

Jason nodded.

"We'll want to send a photographer up. Thanks a lot, Jones. I'll see that we make it up to you for that editorial." He dashed out.

Sergeant Kelly had pulled Willard Duncan to his feet and was pushing him gently towards the door. Snell and Paterson fell in behind them.

At the door, Willard Duncan turned back for a moment.

"So long, Johnny," he said. His mouth was a twisted hole in gray putty. "At least, I'm sure of seeing you in hell."

The broad backs of the three detectives closed in and he was out of sight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WALKING ON A HEEL

THERE WAS an uncomfortable silence in the room for a full minute after they were gone. George Porter was the first to break it. All through the recital of facts by Jason, the portly millionaire had sat quietly on the couch, chewing his lip. Now, his face reddened, he rose and faced Johnny Bell.

"I have decided," he said, "that I am no longer interested in backing your play, Bell. I am glad to say that my eyes have been opened too. It will cost me the ten thousand dollars that I advanced you, but I consider the lesson cheap. . . . I presume, Mr. Jones, that I am free to leave?"

Jason nodded.

George Porter turned and marched stiffly from the room.

"For Pete's sake," Johnny Bell said. "What the hell's wrong with everybody? I never saw such a bunch of mealy-mouthed crumbs! Well, he can take his dough and stick it. Johnny Bell can get plenty of backing."

"Yeah," Bennett Barlay said. "As long as there are suckers around. . . . You know, this is going to be the first time I've felt free in three years. I'm going to take a taxi to celebrate. Betty, can I drop you off somewhere?"

"Thanks, Bennett," Betty Bell said. She walked across the room and Bennett Barlay picked up her bag. She too hesitated in the door and looked back.

"Goodbye, Johnny," she said softly. "You can sue for the divorce if you want to, but if you don't I'll go to Reno in three months. . . . I wish you and Karen happiness. . . . Thanks, Mr. Jones, for helping to open my eyes."

She slipped her arm through Bennett Barlay's and they were gone.

"So that's it," Johnny Bell said, staring after them. "I should have seen it before."

Karen Russell was standing up, smoothing her black and white frock over her hips. But it seemed to Necessary more a gesture of cleansing than of straightening a dress.

"No money," she said, "no play. No play, no Karen. I guess this is my exit cue."

"Go ahead, you cheap ham," Johnny sneered. "You were a lousy actress anyway. You'd have stunk up the whole play. Beat it before I kick your teeth in."

"I'm going," she said. "I wish you and yourself happiness, Johnny."

She moved slowly, and with more dignity than she had ever possessed, across the room and to the stairs.

"I'm going too, Johnny," June Hayes said. "I only stayed the last year because of Manny and now he's gone. You don't need to pay me this week's salary."

"So you're all leaving," Johnny said, "because of a couple of lousy stiffs."

"Not all," June Hayes said. "You've still got Gregor. He'll never leave you because he's your shadow."

"That's right, you've still got me," Fain said.

"Then get to hell out!" Johnny said to June. "Go on you little fool. You were no damn good anyway. And I don't need any of you. Johnny Bell doesn't need anybody! Gregor, call up a couple of babes and we'll have a party to celebrate getting rid of all the rats."

"I think," Jason said, pushing himself out of his chair, "that we'll go too. Everything seems to be cleaned up."

"Just a minute," Necessary Smith said grimly. "I know that technically you're on Homicide, but would you look at that picture up there for a moment?"

"An excellent Matisse," Jason murmured, staring intently at a large oil over the fireplace.

Just as he finished speaking, there was a satisfying smack of flesh against

flesh. Jason turned around and looked. Johnny Bell was on the floor, blood flowing from his nose and staining his yellow scarf to an unhealthy orange.

"Hmmm," Jason said gently. "Bell's nose seems to be bleeding. Probably from over-exertion on his new play. Ah, these creative artists."

He waddled through the door and Necessary followed.

"That," said Necessary when they were on the street, "did me more good than anything I've done in years. I'm sorry that I wasn't more help to you —"

"But you were," Jason interrupted. "Without you, I might not have been able to solve it for days. I don't just mean doing the little investigating you did. I mean your analysis of the case. You were just thrown off a little, because if there was any justice in the world Johnny Bell would have been either the victim or the murderer. That confused you, but your logic was wonderful."

"Well, I felt pretty useless . . ."

"On the contrary, you were definitely Necessary," Jason said with a chuckle. "You know, in a way, I kind of hated to arrest Willard Duncan. He would have never been a murderer if he hadn't been poisoned by Johnny Bell. . . ."

"Something ought to be done about him," Necessary muttered.

"It won't be," Jason assured him. "I'm not even sure that it should. The presence of the Johnny Bells serves to make us feel pretty good when we meet a decent person. No, he has a function. A pretty slimy one, but a function nonetheless. . . . But no more shop, Smith. We are going to get in your car and go to my house. In a few hours, you will sink your teeth into the best apple dumplings you ever tasted.

"But first I'll take you up and show you my greenhouse. You have never seen anything until you have feasted your eyes on an Artemisifolium betulinum in full bloom . . ."

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